Judyth Weaver

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Judyth O. Weaver, Ph.D. in Reichian Psychology, began studying with Charlotte Selver in 1968, after returning from three years in Asia, most of them spent in a Zen Buddhist monastery. She is also certified as a Somatic Experiencing Practitioner, in Biodynamic Craniosacral Therapy, Gestalt Therapy, and in Prenatal and Birth Therapy. She is a Rosen Method practitioner and senior teacher; and a master teacher in T'ai Chi Ch'uan, which she has been practicing since 1968. Judyth taught at the California Institute for Integral Studies and other S.F. Bay Area graduate schools for 25 years. She co-founded Santa Barbara Graduate Institute and created its Somatic Psychology doctoral program. She has developed her own integrated manner of working with people which she calls 'Somatic Reclaiming.' She maintains a private practice in Seattle, Washington, and on Cortes Island, B.C., Canada in the summers, as well as teaches internationally.

Serge Prengel, LMHC is the editor the *Proactive Mindfulness* project.

For better or worse, this transcript retains the spontaneous, spoken-language quality of the podcast conversation.

Serge Prengel: This is a conversation with Judyth Weaver. Hi Judyth.

Judyth Weaver: Hello Serge, it's nice to speak with you again.

S P: Yeah, yeah. So we, last time we didn't touch upon sensory awareness, which you're very, very, very interested in. So, what is sensory awareness?

J W: Sensory Awareness, or actually, I sometimes now call it Somatic Awareness because I think that even Sensory Awareness is limiting, but is what I consider a very magnificent, fantastic work. And it's a practice, it's not a method, but it's a practice of us becoming more fully alive, more fully aware, more fully here. And that's in every aspect of our lives and our perceptions. There is, like I said, there's no method, there's no dogma to it. But the activity, the practice is to explore. Explore all of the sensory input that we and whatever other input there might be, anything that we can become conscious of in our existence. So it's really to help us revive and reclaim our full lives. You know, it seems to me, I fully believe that we're naturally, most of us are born as vital, fully sensory beings. And as we become educated, as we become trained, different traumas, tensions diminish our vitality, thereby it creates unrest and even insecurity in our lives. So sensory awareness, again that goes back to my naming the work that I do as Somatic Reclaiming, Sensory Awareness helps us, brings us back to the simple life, the more full life, maybe. And the practice is exploring. So, we explore gravity, breath, touch, balance, energy, movement, action, rest, anything, in fact sometimes I feel sometimes like I'm really cheating because all I'm doing is leading people in child games in a Sensory Awareness workshop for instance. Or it's more game like because there's more than one person. In individual sessions, it's probably much more intimate. And basically, there is nothing wrong, that's an important emphasis for me in this work, there is nothing wrong, it is just for us to learn what is, what really is, and then, if we don't like it, if becoming aware of it makes us uncomfortable, then we have the awareness and we can change it if we want. But without

awareness, we work, we continue with our habits, with how we've been trained and sometimes that's not optimal. So, this is really, it's very, very simple. You might say it's nothing special in this work. In fact, the founder of the work never had a name for it. *Laughs.* Maybe I should give you some history?

S P: Yeah, yeah that would be great to have a little bit of history about that because it's one of these things that in a way, is around, and everybody would say that they're doing something that is about Sensory Awareness. But it's good to also see it as something that is not just generic and has it's own history and it's own growth.

J W: Exactly. I agree that every, every good psychotherapist even if they think they're a somatic psychotherapist, you know body oriented or not, every good person, clinician does use, does what has some connection with this work and brings their client into it. But to know more about it and how to use it is very, very helpful and allows me and my students, personally and professionally, to use this work, this practice even more effectively. So, the work was started, well starts with everybody who's born, of course, but in the professional field, Elsa Gindler was in Berlin and, back in the early part of the 20th century, and was doing the work that most people did in Germany and around that time, it was called gymnastics which meant beautiful movement and they moved beautifully and moved to music and threw balls and everything and at one point, to make a long story short, she became ill and had to really, really find the quiet in herself to heal herself, which she eventually did and by 1913, she had developed this work, which was very different from the exercises of gymnastics. And she opened up her studio in 1917 and it was basically bringing people more to quiet to really experience what they were experiencing and the great difference from a lot of the other work, for instance is that we don't do exercises, there aren't exercises in sensory awareness. Here, what we do are explorations. So we explore. And as I said, the most important thing is that if there's nothing wrong, everyone will have a different experience when they're being true to themselves because we're all different. And then also, we also find the similarities, how we are not different. So it's the experience that is important.

S P: So, so something about the experience through exploring as opposed to doing an exercise of training the body in a specific exercise. So if you were leading me in a session of exploring, for instance, what would you be suggesting to me to explore?

J W: Well, basically it is so open-ended; I wouldn't even know what to suggest you to explore. I would start; often I start with the person's breath. But, in a one on one session, the person who's sitting next to me, whatever it is that's happening, you know, as body-oriented psychotherapists we look at everything. So if the person's finger is twitching or if they're learning to one side or whatever it is, that's where I would go. Unless and sometimes people bring in specific issues that they want to work with and the most important thing here as we're going and talking into working with people, often I have felt, and we all do it, we ask a client, "So what are you feeling now?"

S P: Mmhm.

J W: And often, very often that client says, "Well, I'm feeling fear," you know? Or something, and the answer from the client is an emotion or I might say an interpretation.

S P: Yeah.

J W: And that, that's very difficult for me because my fear is different from her fear or his fear, and how do we work there? But if I can say, "What are you sensing right now? What are your sensations? Or what is your experience of yourself right now?" And then, if they talk about the tightness in their chest or, or the knot in their belly or something, that's first of all a lot less loaded and easier for us to work with; these senses. And it's sort of like it's underneath the emotions that, where a lot of good work can be done without all of the embroilments of the emotions and connections around there.

S P: Yeah. So either the intensity or the constructed reality or interpretation…

J W: Right.

S P: Just staying at the level of the physical sensation.

J W: Right, and it's not just physical of course. And so one of the things that, in the work, you know I got off even talking about, about history. So Gindler was in Germany, people brought it to the United States in the late 30s. And Charlotte Selver was one of the persons who came from the Gindler School to the United States and there were others but she was the one who actually was, you might say, discovered by Alan Watts. I'm told somebody, you know who Alan Watts was?

S P: Mmhm.

J W: Popularizer of Zen Buddhism in the West and someone called him one day and said, "I met a woman who does what you talk about."

S P: Laughs.

J W: It was really funny and he studied with Charlotte Selver a lot and he introduced Esalen to Charlotte Selver and she actually gave the first experiential workshop at Esalen in 1963. And she, one of the things we were not allowed to do, to use, was you know, they weren't exercises, but even to use the term "body," "what are you feeling in your body?" That's quite limiting. I mean, it's definitely pointed to the senses but it's not just body.

S P: Yeah, yeah.

J W: And the term body, which is why I use the term "somatic psychotherapy" a lot more than "body psychotherapy" is because that also is limiting. It's not that. You know, we can't divide body and mind.

S P: Yes.

J W: We can't separate them, so "What are you feeling?" or "What are you experiencing" gives us more of a full possibility than "What are you feeling in your body?"

S P: Mmhm. Mmhm.

J W: And so, back to history a little bit, the interesting thing is that Wilhelm Reich's first wife studied with Gindler. In fact, Eva, Reich's daughter told me that she was sent to, what she called "a Gindler

school." And she loved it because she was allowed to crawl under things and climb on things. It was very, very active. And then Reich's second wife Elsa Lindenburg also studied with Gindler but we're not sure whether that was before or after she and Reich split up. But Eva feels very, very strongly that if it weren't for the Gindler influence, that Reich would not have come to work with body and breathing in his psychoanalysis work. So she feels it was very, very strongly influenced.

S P: Yeah. Mmm.

J W: Reich's best friend Otto Fenichel studied with Gindler. His wife Claire was a Gindler person and she brought Otto into the work. And Eric Fromm, in the United States, was an avid student of Charlotte Selver's and there were many, many therapies, therapeutic practices developed in Europe that traced their roots back to Gindler. And at one point, I think most of the psychiatrists in the William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry in New York, founded by Eric Fromm and Harry Stack Sullivan – they were all studying with Charlotte Selver. Fritz Pearls studied with, well Fritz' wife Laura studied with Gindler in Europe and Fritz studied with Charlotte, quite, quite intensely in New York for some years.

S P: Mmhm.

J W: And we have an article in a journal, *The Journal of Body Movement and Dance in Psychotherapy* was co-written by two gentlemen in Europe and myself who were really trying to figure out how Reich and if and when he was influenced and all of that and one of them translated a quote from German that Fritz Pearls wrote in 1947 to his, to his wife when he was working with Selver and he said, "I finally found what I have been looking for, all over the years: this kind of work." So it's definitely influenced the various therapeutic practices, psychotherapeutic and others. Peter Levine was influenced by it. And in fact Serge, Charlotte Selver died, I think it was in 2002 at 102 years of age and in 2004 I was asked to be the guest editor. Jacqueline Carleton invited me to be the guest editor of the USA Psychotherapy Journal and it's in memoriam to Charlotte Selver, but there are lots and lots of articles by different therapists and how they were influenced by this work and how they use this work. So that might be nice for our members to know.

S P: Yeah, yeah to see that, the richness of what inspired…

J W: Really, yes. Yes, and as I said it's basic in any good therapy I think. But there are various ways of working both individually and in groups and with couples, that the practice of sensory awareness or somatic awareness can help us be more somatically interactive, you might say. And this helps me a lot when I work with children. And, even young children. Working with adults, I feel like I'm working with children, too because it does bring out our more natural exploration, fun-loving part of us.

S P: Yeah, yeah. So I'm torn in a way between two possible ways that we could take here. One is to go back to Gindler and how she came up with that and to see if from the beginning for her, it had a psychological component?

J W: Good question.

S P: Yeah.

J W: No, it did not. (*Laughs.)*

S P: So it's in a way that a lot of people as they were exploring their own process of psychotherapy that they saw how it could enrich or how it was in sync with what they were exploring.

J W: Yes and I must give a lot of credit, Gindler you know, back in the early 20th century psychoanalysis was just being developed. And Gindler heard about it; people, I mean certainly, the Fenichels, other people were there and Gindler, I'm told, Gindler recommended people to go to a therapist or to go into analysis. She did not do it. And Charlotte Selver was very, very, very strong about it when Fritz Pearls studied with her everyday privately, for a year and a half I'm told, and he wanted her to take on his clients and she refused. You know? And she was not a psychotherapist, neither was Gindler, and she, Selver I know because of my personal experience with her. She firmly believed that no matter what it was, sensory awareness would heal it or would take care of it.

S P: Mmhm.

J W: And I must admit that as you can imagine, doing this simple, deep work a lot comes up. A lot comes up. Traumas from the past, all sorts of things that have been buried because we're finally what, being more real? Maybe the practice of sensory awareness is that nothing's wrong but if I feel something in me that doesn't feel good then I have the choice to change it or to let go of that tension and if that tension has been holding down some memory that I have not wanted to pay attention to, there it is! And Selver very firmly believed that, "well, there it is so just keep on sensing!" And that is what that experience of "Well, there it is!" is for me, what brought me to combine my work in Reichian-based more analytic, psychoanalytic therapy and the sensory awareness so I feel that it works very, very well together.

S P: Mmhm. Mmhm.

J W: But the work called sensory awareness even though some of the people who practice it are therapists, some of the people who practice it are not therapists and it's very definitely not a psychotherapeutic practice. But how can it not be when you can't separate your body and your mind?

S P: Mmhm. Mmhm.

J W: But the focus of these people is not to do psychotherapy.

S P: Yeah. Yeah. So, what we're talking about now, when you know you're doing a workshop or working with people individually, it is something that is integrated with psychotherapy in the sense that you are a psychotherapist so you're not ignoring that component, or that way of, that framework.

J W: Right. Right. Right. Yes, yes. Where Charlotte Selver would just ignore it. *Laughs*. Blessings on her.

S P: Laughs.

J W: And it was really amazing in so many ways. She was saying, "Look, don't get messed up with your mind. With all of those. Just stay with what is; what is here and now." And, you know, when

you stay with what is here and now a lot of the other habits, fears, traumas, whatever, do fall away and we stay very fully supported by the here and now.

S P: Mmhm. Mmhm.

J W: *Laughs.*

S P: Yeah, yeah. But in a way, just somebody who has a meditation practice, is not doing psychotherapy, stays with the here and now. And it does not mean that you cannot also integrate a meditative approach with psychotherapy.

J W: Right, right. And the difference is, that in many, many meditative approaches that there's some form, some pattern and when you get to the, into the more the older lineages there is tradition and dogma and all sorts of things and this is, you might say, sometimes when I give workshops I just call it "Everyday Meditations," because that's what it is, it's meditations without the, the history and without the dogma and without the whatever, it's just the, "so what's happening right now?" The awareness, which is the ultimate meditation. Yes.

S P: So one way to describe what happens in a workshop that you give on sensory awareness or somatic awareness, is it's a moment to describe what's happening right now within the context of a group.

J W: Yes, yes. And not only the group, I mean there is the, you know, we work a lot with ourselves. With our own personal actions, interactions and then in a group, we have the opportunity of working interactively with others but not just "others," other objects as well. I mean, picking up a rock, there's a lot of, there's a lot that's happening as I pick up a rock. I am, my weight changes, my balance changes, there's the touch, all of these things.

S P: So for instance, if we were in the middle of a workshop and the exploration of the moment were about picking a rock, what kind of suggestion, what kind of advice or what would you be doing to guide the people in the workshop?

J W: A-ha! Great. No suggestions. No advice. Actually, no guiding other than, "Would you like to pick up that rock?" And then, I mean, okay, so what happens when I say that? Just saying that already some people have already picked up the rock and put it down before they've moved, you know?

S P: Laughs.

J W: And all of those other things, so it's just, it's as open and also as contained as, because you pick up a rock by yourself. I pick up lots of rocks in my garden, do I feel the weight? Mmm, not unless they're really, really heavy. But what does a small rock do? How do I respond to a small rock as compared to how do I respond to a larger rock? It's very, very different.

S P: So, would you be asking these questions as people pick up rocks?

J W: I would ask them, not "how does it compare?" because that's taking them away from the moment but I would say, you know so, "Would you like to pick up this rock? And now, what happened, what's happened to your balance? You're probably, possibly on your toes already going

there. Okay, so as you walk, can you, are you, feeling the rock already? What are you anticipating or are you here with this step? And then when you get to the rock, I mean, even just looking at the rock, what does that do to you?" And if you close your eyes, it's very, very different than if your eyes are open. And then when you finally do touch the rock, and what changes in your hands and the muscles in your hands and what happens in your lower back or how do your feet feel on the ground as you pick up, now that you have this rock? And then, what if you put it on your head? Or what if it's in one hand and how does that feel? How does your weight feel? And then you change it to the other hand? What happened to the muscles in your arms, what happened to the weight on your feet one side to the other? All of these are probably not questions, but probably experiences that a child has with that open wonderment but we as adults are too sophisticated to feel a lot of those things and just the awareness, that's not going to tell me how to live in the world but it does tell me a lot about how I am.

S P: Right.

J W: And so that does extend to, "how do I live in the world?"

S P: But just at the moment of picking up the rock, what it is, if the questions you're raising are a way of not taking for granted the experience but of noticing various levels so in a way, you're sharing your experience by sharing that there's a lot of things to notice, where I might have just taking for granted that "oh, it's just picking up a rock."

J W: Yes, all of those things to notice, they're, they're amazing. And as I learn about that, all of these things to be noticed and as my notice capabilities expand, I can feel more alive, more safe in the world. If I feel my back as well as my sides as well as my front, then can I be more embodied? Can I be more fully here in the world? And sometimes, I mean, one of the very, very common things that I find in classes is that people learn that when they come to face another person, they stop breathing. And a lot of people, we do that just habitually. How many of us really know that? So, learning something like that can help us be more at ease, be more fully ourselves.

S P: So, so, you know just, I'm staying in a way at the more experiential level, of having a sense of what happens, in a workshop, in a class, in a session and so one of them is, for instance when you pick up a rock. Another is in a way what happens as you walk toward another person and notice this person and start engaging. And I'm trying to get the sense of, in a way of, what you're describing is the practice of exploring instead of an exercise. So, for instance, in other forms of paying attention to the body, you could be, you know, doing an exercise with moving your arm and noticing something so how would it be in sensory awareness? Is there, would you have, for instance, an exploration of moving your arm or moving your leg and what would it be like compared to an exercise?

J W: Well, yes. We do spend a lot of time sometimes moving our arm or leg, and also sometimes having other people moving our arms and legs. And the difference would be if it were an exercise, maybe I would tell you how to lift your arm or where to lift your arm or how fast? And in sensory awareness I would not say how or where, sometimes I might say, "Slowly," but it's still open for you to experience whatever it is. And another thing that's important is that when I feel that the exploration is finished and I'm ready to go onto something else, I also tell people if whatever they're with is still meaningful, don't follow me, follow themselves. So someone might want to stay with that longer than my quote exercise unquote would take. But it's important, that's theirs, that's their experience.

S P: Yeah, yeah.

J W: And then working with someone else lifting my arm is a whole other experience of course. And that brings in a whole lot more other issues like what, trust? Allowing? Tension versus relaxtion. All sorts of things can come up just with a very simple activity.

S P: Mmhm, mmhm, mmhm, mmhm, yeah. So really, the practice is very firmly rooted in observations as opposed to doing something specific, it's really observing whatever it is that you're doing.

J W: I'm glad you mentioned that because I have a little bit of trouble with the word "observing." Because that still makes it, "I'm looking at it," you know? So I wouldn't say, "Would you notice that or would you observe it?" It's more what is your experience so that I'm in it rather than observing it.

S P: Mmhm, yeah. So you're not separate from what you're observing.

J W: Right.

S P: You're very in it and you're paying attention to the experience so very, it feels a very strong concept. You're not separating mind from body, you're not separating yourself from the experience.

J W: Right, right. And I think that's, that's a fine point that makes the difference for me in the work of sensory awareness. Sometimes just one word can change a person's experience so much, as we all know. We have to be, as facilitators, in sensory awareness, we're not teachers. We're leaders, maybe. And mostly, it's an invitation I give to someone, not a direction, and then I let them find what it is for them, what the experience it is for them, and then we can go from there.

S P: Wonderful. So as we're coming toward the end, is this a good place to conclude or is there something you would want to add or…

J W: You know, I'd like to give a little example of really, because I talked about individually and then in group and then I haven't spoken much about taking this out into the world. And to me that is so important; how do we live in the world? And how do we deal with, meet people, interact with people in the world for the best of all of us? And just, one example comes to mind of a long, long time ago I was giving, I was scheduled to give a workshop at Esalen and there was a group of 17, actually 17, people from Japan who came to this workshop specifically, and Esalen forgot to tell the few other Caucasians who were registered for the workshop that there would be a group of 17 Japanese, none of whom spoke English. And that night, there were I think five Caucasians, one of whom was a man from a country in Europe, who was not happy at all. He was not happy at all with the Japanese group, he was not happy with a lot of things and it was very, very obvious, to me anyway, that he was having problems. And I give him a lot of credit for even staying in the workshop. But on the second or third day, we were just working with the activity of standing, of standing, and a Japanese man described how he felt when he was standing and the man from Europe gasped and said you know, "This is how I was taught to stand as a child in my school," and as you can imagine, what was happening in Europe back in you know, this was in the 30s in school, and the men just sort of bonded with each other. They both had the same experience. This European man hated Japanese; he told us afterward he hated Japanese. But just that experience of knowing

that they had a common experience in their bodies, I want to say, but in their whole beings. I saw anger and hatred just melt and those men really bonded with each other and were good friends for a long time. And it's just simple, simple awareness of ourselves and maybe the camaraderie, the things that we share can, I would hope, help us communicate in the world and maybe, maybe experience people in different ways.

S P: Yeah, yeah. So as we go into the experience itself as opposed to the extra layers that are…

J W: Right.

S P: That, we can build on it.

J W: Right. That we are all human. That we all have these experiences. That we all have, you know pain and, and whatever and happiness and everything and that we, you know, can communicate on that level beyond boundaries and dogmas and maybe under boundaries and dogmas and just the reality of us being human beings.

S P: Thanks, Judyth.

This conversation was transcribed by Megan E. Solberg

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