



Lynn Somerstein

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Lynn Somerstein, PhD, NCPsyA, LP, RYT, licensed psychoanalyst in private practice, is Executive Director of the Institute for Expressive Analysis. Dr. Somerstein is on the editorial board of the *Psychoanalytic Review* and the author of numerous articles about yoga, anxiety, attachment issues and psychotherapy. Dr. Somerstein is also an international speaker, and has presented her work in India, Turkey, China, and in the United States. She uses the wisdom she has gained as a yoga teacher, psychologist and student of Ayurveda, or Indian life knowledge, to help people reach their innermost goals.

Serge Prengel, LMHC is the editor the *Relational Implicit* project (<http://relationalimplicit.com>).

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

Serge Prengel: Hi, Lynn

Lynn Somerstein: Hi

S P: So, Lynn, you're a psychoanalyst, a yoga teacher, somebody who's very interested in breathing.

L S: Yes, I love all of those three things. When I thought I'd get this interview, at first I was a little scared and intimidated and then I thought, "You know, I'm here to talk about the stuff that I really love." And I really love yoga, and I really love psychoanalysis and breathing too. They go together.

S P: They go together, so it's not necessarily something that everybody would necessarily associate. So in what way do they go together?

L S: For me, they go together as different ways for a person to get to know yourself and to develop yourself, and just become more of who you are and what you're capable of being. To know what your capabilities are. So when I was 16 in high school, I started studying yoga by myself; I just loved it. There were no yoga schools, there were no yoga mats, and there was no yoga industry. But then, after awhile, Swami Satchidananda came to town and he had very cheap yoga lessons which I could afford because I had no money, and I went to yoga and learned more about what it was about. So that's been a theme in my life for many, many years. I'm a grandma, and I've been doing yoga for about 50 years, which is unusual. Um, at the same time I was very interested in what makes people who they are, what are they like? So, when I was in high school, I was reading Freud, and trying to think about my own dreams, and trying to figure out other people, and these are two abiding interests in my life, for a long time, and they seemed opposites.

S P: Yeah, yeah, so, figuring out who you are, figuring out who people are. So that's a pursuit that feels a little opposite from the yoga.

L S: It does at first glance. I think many psychoanalysts, well, I shouldn't say this anymore, it's just not true, but perhaps at that time, many psychoanalysts thought that yoga was kind of ditsy, and I think a lot of yogis were resentful of Western psychologists because, in fact, Western psychology had dismissed the wisdom of yoga, so they were, for a long time, in two different camps, but I was in both of their camps, always, and so, more and more, it became important to me to put these two parts of my life together.

S P: Yeah, yeah. So at the time, a sense that for a psychoanalyst, yoga was kind of this weird, ditsy, Eastern stuff.

L S: Mystical, naïve, right.

S P: And, that, for yogis, psychoanalysis might be too heady

L S: Exactly right. So I was kind of, with one foot in each camp, and that was ok for a long time, and I kind of segmented myself, when I was in yoga class, I was one way, when I was an analyst I was another way. But meanwhile, all this time, I was an analyst, I was also a yoga teacher, and so, sometimes, I would be teaching yoga, and I would see somebody and think that if they were in my therapy office, I know what I would help them with, and if someone was in my therapy office, I'd look at them and I'd think, "I wish that they were in my yoga class!" But, they're two different things, and it is good to have divisions between bodies of knowledge. And I was also scared to put them together. I thought, "My God, my analytic buddies are going to think I'm nuts and my yoga buddies are going to think I just lost the cause. So I was scared for a long time to put the two of them together. And then I had a really great opportunity. I got very brave and I wrote something about my own psychological experiences doing yoga, just from a personal point of view, and that writing was accepted in a big conference in India, and I was really excited to go, and a little scared that I was going to talk about yoga in India, you know, that's pretty nervey on my part. But I did, and people liked what I had to say, and that just made me feel braver, I guess. I was emboldened by my experience. So then I came back home and I continued working with people, and saw there was one woman in my yoga class whose lack of confidence was written all over her body, and her discomfort with her body was painful for me to see. I liked her, and I thought, "She really hates herself," and I felt very badly. So, in yoga, you start out the class usually sitting in a cross-legged position, which is infinitely painful for most Westerners; sitting up on the floor cross-legged, you'd shoot yourself. But she was trying, and really in a lot of pain, and I wanted to help her. So I found ways to make her comfortable, and then I just did it. Every time she was in the class I did it, and eventually, she learned how to make herself comfortable, and that had a big effect on her feelings about herself, and she learned that she could feel comfortable, that there were things she could do. And it made me very happy to see the effect, and in fact, she became a yoga teacher, which is really wonderful. So, experiences like that were very positive.

S P: So that was a part of seeing that psychotherapy was not the only way, that people would gain confidence, and that there was a psychological transformation that you were witnessing from someone that you were helping only through yoga.

L S: That's right. I'm glad that you mention it in that way, because the truth is it's a big world, and there are a lot of ways that people can find to help themselves, or that you can find to help somebody else, and they're all valid. Through the body, through the mind, spiritually...all these words mean is that they're different aspects of human beings. We're so vast, why would you prefer

one antidote to another, when any of them can work? So then we get back to me in the office. So there I am, watching someone sitting slumped over and depressed, no self-confidence, listening to a very sad story, watching the person's breathing become less and less. And as the breathing in the person becomes less and less, she droops more and more, and as she droops more and more, she compresses her lungs so she can't breathe, and her energy level just sinks. And of course, it makes her more depressed. So I'm watching this process, and I thought, if she were in my yoga class, I would say, "Sit up straight and let's do some deep breathing," and that's what I did. So, that was a little scary to do that, because you're not supposed to do that if you're an analyst, usually, but then I thought, "You know what? This is going to really help her." So I said, "How about you try sitting up a little straighter? And let's take some deep breaths because that could make you feel better. Let's try it." And we did a three part breath in yoga, deep breathing. It has a wonderful effect if you're depressed, and also if you're anxious, because if you follow your breath and take good deep breaths, you're just going to feel better. It's a physiological approach and it actually has a psychological result. It's like a circle, and wherever you come in on that circle, it all counts.

S P: So, interesting, that experience, that client in your office. You're noticing her posture and that cycle of the posture. And it's not necessarily the case that every psychoanalyst in the world might have made the connection as strongly as you did. And that maybe in a way your experience as a yoga practitioner and a yoga teacher maybe allowed you to be more sensitive to that connection, even before trying to change it.

L S: I think that's true, but to be accurate, we have to say that Freud said the body comes first. The body never lies. So, he was in his way, certainly very attuned to the reactions of the body. The particular brand of psychoanalysis that interests me is object-relations theory. And object-relations theory is really about the interaction between two people, and my mentor in object-relations theory is Art Robbins, who is a psychoanalyst and the founder of the Institute for Expressive Analysis, where I'm now the director, and he has always been vitally interested in body posture, and one of the exercises that we sometimes did when we were trying to understand a person in our care, was to inhabit the body of that other person, and that really shows you who a person is, it's really remarkable. So all of our experiences and our memories and our feelings, they're all inscribed in the body. I don't see that there's a separation between mind and body; I see they work together, and that togetherness is what really counts, and now the latest neuropsychanalytic research shows, in fact, that's right! That's how it works. So, I feel wonderful about that.

S P: Yeah, yeah. So, in a sense, for you, what you're saying is that it's not just for you your yoga experience but your whole training in object-relations psychoanalysis has dealt that sense that in order to understand a person you have to walk in their shoes and be in that embodied way, is a good way to have more of a sense of what actually happens inside.

L S: That's literally true. There's a Native American saying that, if you want to know someone, you should walk 100 miles in their moccasins, and I guess that's what's really behind it.

S P: So, we were talking earlier, you at 16 reading Freud, but your own training went to a place where the self, the psychology was not separate from the body. But yet, it was a leap of faith and a transgression in some way to have an intervention at the level of the body instead of simply being aware of it, but not connected to the person at the level of the body.

L S: That's exactly right, even though we're connecting at the body level all the time. Our communication is very much a body communication, not just a verbal communication. It's the things and the rhythms that go back and forth between the people that are speaking. You and I, you're seated in exactly the same way. Our hands are the same, our feet are the same.

S P: [Laughs] Yes, very much so.

L S: So, that's as I see it, the most important part.

S P: So, that experience, at that moment, you decided with that client to say, "I'm going to use that breathing." What did that feel like for you to do that?

L S: Well, at first I thought, boy I'm going to get in trouble, but I'm going to try it anyway because I like to try stuff. And I knew the patient really, really well. That client had been working with me for long enough that if she didn't like it, she would tell me and we wouldn't do it. It wouldn't have any deleterious effect, except, she might not like it. But, it felt good to start it, and then I kind of wasn't sure, like what should I do? And I thought, well, I'm just going to breathe too, but I'll kind of keep my eye on her and see how it feels to her, because I was teaching her, and part of teaching is demonstrating. And the color in her face rose, and she kind of woke up, I guess is a good way to say it, because now she had enough oxygen, really. It's such a silly thing. It seems silly. It seems silly because it's simple. And a lot of times, people say something is so easy, they don't give it credit for what it's worth. Yes, it's very easy, breathing is really, really easy, but you better do it.

S P: So I am curious about what doing this, that first step and other steps you may have taken afterwards, how it changed your perception of yourself in the therapy room.

L S: That's a really nice question. I think it's expanding my sense of self and I think it's made me more able to be spontaneous in the therapy room because I'm less indebted to rules that I may not agree with. So I have a different, fuller way of being which I think makes me a better therapist.

S P: So there was really a sense of crossing the Rubicon, navigating a transgression, and then you entered new territory and then became freer.

L S: So maybe I should say that transgression; my father was a policeman. A transgression in my house was a serious business; you didn't do it and get away with it. At the same time, I was always transgressive because I liked to do things my own way, so I'm sure that was a big part of my emotional experience when I said, "Why don't you sit up straight, let's try and breathe and see what happens?"

S P: So, in that moment, the authority you had as a healer didn't come just from one tradition, but it was from the total sum of your experience and about all of you as a person.

L S: That's exactly right. It felt wonderful, as anything feels when you're totally engaged. It's a beautiful feeling. It's beautiful to see someone have a better life, have the life that they want and deserve to have.

S P: So afterwards, what's been happening in terms of seeing the relative influence of yoga on psychotherapy or of psychotherapy on yoga?

L S: It's an interesting, growing field. There's something called the International Association of Yoga Therapists, which I belong to. And [as] they're defining themselves, [we may ask ourselves] what is a yoga therapist? Is it a physical therapist, is it a psychological therapist? Is it somewhere in between? And right now, they're kind of expanding their layers of certification in whatever modalities that they're using. I think that it's a field that will increase as contemporary research shows, for example, that mirror neurons, which had been studied a lot by a man named V.S. Ramachandran, who has shown the effect that mirror neurons have. In a simple way, if you see somebody fall, and you move with their sudden movement, if somebody drops something you kind of move to catch it. So that's a simple example of a mirror neuron. But it's being shown now that those mirror neurons may be the basis of empathic relationships and empathic responses, because your body is experiencing somebody else's body on a very visceral level.

S P: So that sense of it's our ability, you know, what you were doing by going into somebody else's posture in a conscious way, is actually something that we do automatically, and that's the basis of our experience of empathy.

L S: Yes, that's exactly right.

S P: So, how does this change what you do in the therapy room? Or does it? Is it just a theory that simply explains it but doesn't really change the practice of it, or has it influenced your practice?

L S: You know, I don't like to only be theoretical; I'm a very practical person, so I like to see things work. Not everybody is able or interested in breathing or meditation or yoga, so people who are not interested, who come to my office, we don't work that way. It's not accessible to them. That's ok. It's like, if you're a yoga teacher, and some people can touch the floor with their palms, while some people can bend over and touch their knees, and they're lucky if they get that far. It depends on what's accessible to you, what your abilities are. So for those people who are not able to work in that way, they can work in other ways. This gives me another modality to reach people, and even if you help people, for example, people can be still asleep, their energies are unbounded, and their energy runs away with them, and the tail is wagging the dog; they're out of control. So to help them to learn how to use that energy, it's a blessing when you're able to do that. And one way for people to begin to know what their energy is is to breathe, and be conscious of breathing, and to meditate. And even if people meditate for a very short time, five minutes, if it's done in a consistent way, in a regular way, over time it really has an effect on self-knowledge and on the ability to be more in control of your flow

S P: So as I hear you talk what I'm hearing is a sense of the notion of practice, a sense of the notion of education development through practice, and that is something that you bring to the therapy room is that orientation of building a skill that helps people develop their ability

L S: For myself, I know that helping people build skills that they have and find new ones is very rewarding. A long time ago, one of my first jobs was to work as a social worker for the welfare system, I went into people's homes, which I found hard; it felt very intrusive. I thought, "What can I do to help them, I don't just want to be an agent of the government. And I thought I could help people get good nutrition for themselves and their family, and not waste money on potato chips.

S P: Yeah, yeah. So that teaching...and building. So as we talk about these things, does it feel like a good place to end or is there something that you might want to add?


L S: I think I would like to add one thing, which is my attitude toward my own analyst, Leila Lerner, who I started seeing when I was 30 years old, at a very low point in my life, and she really had the faith that, more than I had, that I'd be able to put together a good life. She did not use yoga in her consulting room, but she was certainly very freeing about enabling me to do what I felt was internally the best thing that I could do for myself, so I want to thank her.

S P: So, as I'm hearing you say that, there's something that feels moving about coming back and thinking about what you were seeing at the beginning, at the commonality between both, and you used the word freeing, and I think of the Eastern notion of liberation and I'm seeing in the tribute to give to your analyst that sense of your gratitude to the people who have found ways of liberation.

L S: I think the ability to experience gratitude is probably the strongest ability a person can have.

S P: Yeah, it feels moving. As we're talking about it right now, I'm feeling that sense of shared emotion. It feels very, very nice.

L S: Yes, me too.

 *This conversation was transcribed by Diane Botta.*

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