# The Human Potential Chronicles, Part Four
# Speculations on Our Emotional Potential

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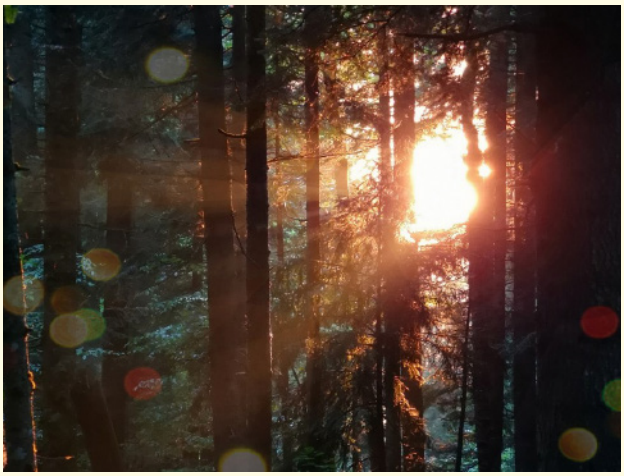

Ever since Michael Murphy and I conceived of Integral Transformative Practice™ in 1991, we've called it "a long-term program for realizing the potential of body, mind, heart, and soul." Thus far in these Chronicles, I've written about the potentials of mind and body. Now we come to the human "heart" or emotions, a subject that might seem too ambiguous or even ethereal to be addressed in terms of potential.

Actually, the feeling realm plays a crucial role in our lives, as reflected in the very structure of our brains. The evolutionary neuroanatomist, Paul MacLean, was first to call the human brain a triune (threefold) brain, which makes it easier for us to understand where most of our feelings originate. Here are the three brains that make one:

1. The reptilian brain. The first and most ancient of the three is simply an unprepossessing knob at the head of the spine. This structure regulates heart rate, breathing, and chemical balance throughout the body. For reptiles, it also offers a few stereotyped instructions for action, such as attack and escape from attack. For us humans, it's only the first and most primitive of our three brain structures. But it's the one and only brain that reptiles — snakes, lizards, alligators, crocodiles, turtles — possess. And it has very little if anything to do with emotions as we think of them, not even regarding the reptiles' own offspring. Newborn snakes move fast, simply to avoid being eaten by their mothers.

2. The limbic brain. This structure, wrapped around the reptilian brain, evolved along with the mammals. It was discovered and named in 1879 by a French surgeon and neuroanatomist named Paul Broca, who called it "le grande lobe limbique." Today we refer to it simply as the limbic brain or limbic system, and we know that, even though it has a number of discreet parts with specialized functions, its most important overall function lies in its ability to deal with the feelings. It registers love, fear, anger, enjoyment, surprise, disgust, sexual pleasure, and the like, offering us mammals many advantages, including freedom from the simple, repetitive behaviors of the reptiles.

The greatest evolutionary advantage of the limbic brain has to do with its effect on the care of the mammalian young. Due to the limbic system, a lioness, not less than a chipmunk, possesses powerful feelings for its offspring and will do whatever possible for their protection and nurturance.

3. The neocortex. The most recent and, especially in the human, by far the largest component of the triune brain is the neocortex, which is wrapped around the limbic lobe just as the limbic is wrapped around the reptilian. This is the brain of language, logic, and all abstract thought. It's the brain that can devise a way to fly to the moon, to figure out the laws of gravity, to write exquisite poetry and music— and also to kill thousands of people because they "believe" in a different system of worship. A much thinner version of the neocortex exists in primates other than human, and an even thinner version in other mammals— your pet dog or cat, for example. The human neocortex, however, is truly monstrous, comprising two-thirds the mass of the entire human brain. Because of its great size and world-shaping ability at abstract thought, the neocortex, you might suppose, rules the triune brain. Actually, in the nitty-gritty of individual human life, the limbic brain trumps the neocortex. It takes significantly longer and is more difficult for the neocortex to influence the limbic system than for the limbic system to influence the neocortex. And the limbic role in sharing feelings with others, as we'll see, can significantly influence our well-being— and even the survival of our infants and young children.

**Human society's war against feelings**

Over the eons of evolutionary time, the three brains now seen in humans developed and came together to form a single brain. Connections developed among them so that they could, in many situations, act with a common purpose. At the same time, however, each of the three maintained a significant autonomy. The limbic brain, for example, continues to dominate the feeling realm, thus demonstrating again and again the powers of shared feelings in our very survival— and the recurrent war against them.

Early in the last century, when the germ theory of illness was at its height, a number of experiments were conducted in foundling homes and institutions: infants were kept clean and warm and well fed while human contact was reduced to an absolute minimum— no caressing, no baby talk, no feelings. All the infants in these experiments became sickly and lost weight. Many died. Ironically, the more hygienic and "logical" the treatment, the more babies contracted such contagious diseases as measles— just what their guardians were trying to avoid. Death rates often topped 75 percent.

The human limbic system is the largest and most active of that system among all animals, and thus we are potentially the most emotionally advanced animals on this planet. But there are more than a few societal forces working diligently to turn off our feelings and thus dull our empathy for others.

For example, surveys conducted at the end of World War II revealed that a majority of American infantrymen never shot to kill an enemy soldier, and that the fear of killing another human being often topped the fear of dying. Drastic measures were taken to remedy this situation. In rifle and machine gun practice, simple bulls-eye targets were replaced by realistic shapes of enemy soldiers that pop up randomly on the target range, designed as much as possible to resemble a battlefield. The basic idea was to accustom our soldiers to killing by making the enemy ostensibly human but actually something less than human. This sort of conditioning might be appropriate for soldiers going into battle, but, sadly, we've witnessed the tragic misuse of such training among some members of our armed forces.

This sort of dehumanization can easily go too far not just in the military but in the culture at large.

You have only to turn on your television or go to an "action" movie or play video games, and you'll witness a whole culture being indoctrinated in destruction and death. More and more television commercials feature scenes of car crashes, houses and people blowing up, whole cityscapes collapsing. And should you surf through all your TV channels, the odds are good that you'll be confronted with one or more close-up views of that icon of our age, the handgun. Only time will tell how we abide these repetitive attacks on our positive feelings.

**Just another type of "intelligence?"**
Daniel Goleman's best-selling 1995 book, Emotional Intelligence, like those of the more research-oriented works that preceded it, has treated the emotions simply as another form of "intelligence." Goleman's book promises, as did Dale Carnegie's in 1936, that by being sensitive to other's emotions, you can Win Friends and Influence People. The language among these writers is analytical, strategic, and often abstract; that is to say, straight from the neocortex. Such books and studies and the attitudes and actions they suggest can be helpful, but in this Chronicle I would like to explore a deeper and more mysterious domain: the human body itself.

The limbic brain has little or no ability with language or abstractions of any kind while the neocortex can describe feelings brilliantly but doesn't feel them directly. The limbic brain, however, has a very effective though often ignored way of signaling specific feelings, which is through the agency of the human body. The emotion of anger, for example, is likely to produce a tightening of the muscles throughout the body, especially the front half, with the jaw thrust forward. Fear generally creates trembling and a distinctive, wide-eyed expression. "Falling in love" can cause a dreamy look and bouncy way of walking. Erotic arousal has its own rather dramatic means of bodily expression.

Some feeling states, especially those constituting facial expressions, appear not only to signal specific feeling states but also to be essentially the same across all human cultures. In the 1960s, a young psychologist from San Francisco, Paul Ekman, began traveling to such places as Brazil, Argentina, and Japan to see if people from those lands all exhibited the same expressions for the same feelings. He then went deep into the New Guinea jungles and filmed isolated tribes that had never met an outside culture. After viewing 100,000 feet of film, he had no more doubts: certain facial expressions along with their meanings can be read as a universal language. Such familiar expressions, it must be said, are easy to decipher — and, if genuine, originate largely in the limbic brain.

The human face, however, is the only part of the body where the skin is attached directly to the nerves just beneath it, and thus can be specific in displaying feelings. In the rest of the body, the expressions of feelings are less obvious and take more skill and practice to decipher. The question remains: how do emotions get from the mostly nonverbal limbic brain to the highly verbal neocortex? How are they translated? We can speculate that the limbic system transmits them directly to various parts of the body, the best — and generally most ignored — feelings receiver we have.

The body plays the part, metaphorically, of a radio or television set, receiving, decoding, and displaying specific emotions originated in the limbic system in bodily forms that can be "read" by the neocortex. The neocortex, with its well-honed verbal skills, can find words for the limbic transmission ("I'm really sad" or "I'm quite disgusted" or "I've never been so happy") then choose to report the feeling to a friend or simply to the self.

**The body as teacher**

In 1965, while doing reportage for a major magazine article on the human potential, I had he good fortune of meeting Michael Murphy, the co-founder of Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. Murphy and the Institute were to become especially significant in my life. It was a period of high excitement at Esalen concerning the importance of the body. This wasn't just in dealing with its muscular-mechanical operations, but in learning to understand its role as a keen and accurate judge of previously hidden feelings.

Numerous "Body Workers" from the U.S. and other countries migrated to Esalen during the 60s and 70s, each with his or her own form of bodywork. I experienced various forms of this work and was at first greatly surprised to be asked after a certain manipulation, something on the order of "What are you feeling right now in your solar plexus?" I soon discovered that such questions generally yielded helpful answers, mostly positive. In 1970, I began the practice of aikido, a Japanese martial art known to be the most difficult of the arts to learn. I've continued practicing up to the present and now hold a fifth-degree black belt. Perhaps the most important— and totally unexpected— gift that has come to me from this art is a related practice for getting in touch with our own bodies.

My first aikido teacher, Robert Nadeau, had developed a series of exercises inspired by aikido, but without the complex moves, the strenuous falls, of the martial art itself. He called it Energy Awareness. After apprenticing with him on this material while continuing the martial art, I developed a body-oriented practice that came to be called Leonard Energy Training or simply LET. Since 1974, I've had the opportunity of introducing this practice to many people throughout the U.S. and in other countries as well.

In 1976, fellow aikidoists Wendy Palmer, Richard Heckler, and I started our own martial arts school, where I taught LET as well as aikido. LET has also played a key role in Integral Transformative Practice (ITP) ever since its founding in 1992 and has become one of the most useful and popular practices in many ITP groups. (See Chapter Eleven, "The Body as Teacher," in The Life We Are Given, by Leonard and Murphy.)

**One of life's truly incomparable gifts**

To get started realizing more of your emotional potential, acknowledge any negative feelings in your body. Move even more deeply into them. What in your life did they come from? What are they saying to you now? Could you do without them? What would life be like if you did? Then two more questions: "What, if anything, am I getting out of holding onto such negative feelings? Is there a better way?"

Concentrate on relaxing your body, especially those parts of it — shoulders, abdomen, throat, forehead, whatever— that have become tight and painful from expressing negative feelings. Don't hurry. Don't go for lasting change in a few minutes. Limbic messages are generally slow in changing. [A warning here: A long-persisting or constantly recurrent pain might signal some purely physiological problem. In case of doubt, see your physician.]

Again, taking your time, explore your entire body carefully and thoroughly for positive feelings. Ally

yourself with any such feeling. Cultivate it. Celebrate it. Consider all the possibilities it might open in your life. Are you willing, deep down, to accept and enjoy it? Are you willing to accept all such gifts graciously?

Again, be patient. At the same time, however, bear in mind that to realize more of your emotional potential, to feel the thrilling flow, the tingling of positive feeling coursing through your body, constitutes one of life's truly incomparable gifts.