

The Limits of Primal

by

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Spring 2005

This paper was submitted to fulfill a requirement by The International Primal Association for certification as a PRIMAL INTEGRATION EDUCATOR.

Preface

Some Biographical Notes

At 12 years old I became fascinated with the battle of Stalingrad. I celebrated the Russian victory, and then read all the other war news too. As a student, I was shocked at the suffering and death from this terrible war. When the news of the holocaust became known the horror became even worse.

I had been taught by my parents and school teachers that education was the key to solving most problems. Everyone said, "get educated, and study hard." But later I discovered that the Germans were a very highly educated people. How could such an educated nation bring such suffering to the world?

As a college student after the war at Columbia University, I became fascinated and impressed by the late Rev. James A. Pike. He was a forceful, interesting and provocative preacher. He talked about evil, sin, love and a transcendent God who became Man. He didn't think that education alone was the answer. He said an intelligent and reasonable religion was the way to go. I listened intently to him every Sunday and took his religion course.

I decided to go to seminary. At The Virginia Theological Seminary (Episcopal) in Alexandria Virginia, I was thrilled because for the first time in my life I could discuss and think about religion intelligently. Nobody said: "Just believe." Nobody said: "You will understand later." Nobody pressured me. On the contrary, they welcomed my questions and honored my doubts. Later I was ordained and served as a minister for 16 years in various parishes in Massachusetts.

I tried to bring an intelligent religion to my parishioners like Bishop Pike and others I had met in seminary. Many people responded and would say things like, "coming to church helps me get through the week;" and "I have faith in God and his love." But gradually I began to realize that people needed more than a simple faith. Prayer seemed to help, but often prayer and belief in a loving God was not helpful enough. Many persons in my parish were still anxious, confused, depressed, and unhappy, no matter how hard they prayed or how often they attended church. Some regular church goers were arrogant, pushy, bigoted, and sometimes even mean and cruel. Why was that?

I began to take another look at psychology. I went to the library and read all that I could find. I attended as many workshops, lectures, and conferences as I could. I talked to other counselors, psychologists and psychiatrists. I tried counseling in my parish office. That work seemed to be getting me someplace. I started to like the individual counseling better than preaching from the pulpit.

When I turned 40, I knew it was now or never. I took the leap. I left the parish ministry and became an accredited marriage counselor in private practice. My wife, Ginny, was very supportive. I could not have done it without her because at the time we had four children and lots of expenses. She found a good job that really held the family together during some hard times. Now there was no regular church salary. Now, I had to wait for the phone to ring. Some days it was a long wait.

After a few years, my private practice was going pretty well, but I could see that ordinary counseling wasn't enough either. People seemed to like my help, but I wasn't satisfied with the long term results. There must be something more. I kept looking and looking.

In August of 1972 at the local library I happened upon, *The Primal Scream*, by Arthur Janov. When I read that book I felt, "here was the answer." I wrote Janov and applied for training. After a six months wait, I received a mimeographed postcard saying that there were no openings.

Fortunately, I found a group of persons in the Boston area who had also read *The Primal Scream*. We started meeting together. We called ourselves *The Boston Study Group*. That group met approximately once a week for 10 years. Also, I heard about The International Primal Association and became a member in 1974. I have been an active member of the IPA ever since.

Definitions Used

Primal: A primal is when a person experiences, understands and integrates for the first time an important personal prior event or condition.

Primalling: The process of uncovering, understanding and integrating an important personal prior event or condition.

Abreaction: A deep feeling without understanding it.

The Value of Primal Work

Many persons have trouble accessing feelings. I was one of the lucky ones who in my first primal session was able to access some past unresolved material. Beginning from that session to the present day I have been able to access and resolve a multitude of unresolved issues. I feel hugely blessed for being able to do this. I will always be thankful for Arthur Janov, various therapists, and all my friends who have over the years helped me again and again become more of a total and real person. This has been accomplished through therapy, buddying, workshops, IPA interactions, and personal contact. I am in total agreement with Arthur Janov's theory about the value of uncovering and resolving historic personal material through a deep feeling process.

Not only has the deep feeling process helped me personally, but I have seen many others helped also. I have seen people give up addictions of alcohol, drugs, smoking and more. I have seen shy persons who wouldn't even speak up in group meeting become outgoing, strong and full of leadership ability. I have seen people who were almost dead emotionally, become alive and vibrant. I have seen confused, dependent persons become strong and self directed. I have seen persons change professions and do something in their life that they really love despite the risks involved.

Of particular interest to me has been the astonishing creativity of persons who have practiced primal therapy. I have enjoyed immensely the art, music, dramatics, poetry, comedy, sports and other creative works of primal folks. Over and over again I have seen persons grow and develop especially in the IPA. I never saw this kind of growth in the church or any place else. It is truly wonderful.

But I have also found that there are important limits to what primal can accomplish. That is the theme of the following paper.

The Limits of Primal

The value of primal therapy is definitely limited by the quality of the therapist, the condition of the client and cultural and other factors.

I. Errors of the Therapist Limit Primal.

A. A therapist who has not personally done enough primal work on him or herself is liable to err with a client.

If you are trying to facilitate a client and they hit upon a topic that is hot for you and is unresolved in yourself, you are very likely to foul it up. I cannot stress this point enough. To my mind it is the major reason for poor therapy. I know of no one who is *totally clean from all unresolved issues*, but to try and help people when you haven't done enough primal work yourself is asking for trouble. Subjects like mother, dad, siblings, sex, birth, conception etc. are too tough to handle if you haven't worked through a lot of that material yourself. I know of no tricks, techniques or knowledge to solve this problem except to work on yourself, or refer to another therapist who is more capable.

B. A therapist who is overwhelmed with personal problems is liable to err with a client.

A client should be the center of the session. If a therapist is overwhelmed with their own personal problems a session can be most difficult and likely to be unproductive. If a therapist is tired from overwork and stress, they are liable to doze off and even go to sleep during a boring session. This is bad. When it happened to me a few times, I would always apologize and refund money. It was very embarrassing. Sometimes an overwhelmed therapist will share personal problems with a client. This is bad. A good therapist does not burden a client with his/her personal problems.

C. Lack of knowledge by the therapist limits his/her effectiveness.

There are many different opinions about how to do primal therapy ranging from non-directive to very directive and everything in between. Also, there are hundreds of types of therapy other than primal, from psychoanalysis to yoga. If a therapist does not know quite a bit about different styles, methods and techniques they can be limited in what they can offer a client. Sometimes helping someone to uncover past trauma is unwise. In that case, you need knowledge of other modalities that might help. Sometimes a client centered approach is best and sometimes firm direction is needed. All of this needs constant study and practice. The more knowledge the better.

D. Therapists who attempt to help a client primal too soon are making a mistake.

In the 70's and early 80's this was a major problem for myself and others. We were under the impression that we should do everything we could to break down a persons defenses so that they could get to the material underneath and primal it out of existence. We were largely influenced by the writings of Arthur Janov in this regard. Now I know that a premature emphasis upon primalling is absolutely wrong. The object of therapy should be to help a person improve their life gradually, not necessarily to primal.

Some people need coaching in life skills more than primalling.

Some people need more defenses rather than less. Some people need help getting a job or finding friends. Some people must resolve serious health or financial problems before attempting to primal. A person who lives alone and has no friends should not attempt to primal. This is because the body will always protect itself from excessive pain. If your present life is chock full of pain (finances, interpersonal conflict, loneliness, career, etc.) forget trying to add more pain with primalling. Your body just won't allow it! And that is as it should be.

It is totally wrong to believe that primalling should be the goal of every session. It simply tragic that many practitioners still do not know this simple truth. Everyone is different, and to say that everyone should primal in every session is like saying everyone should have surgery when they visit the doctor.

E. A therapist who pushes a client in a certain direction is often wrong.

Recently there has been quite a bit written about *False Memory Syndrome*. Some therapists have even been taken to court and sued on this issue. In all the reading I have done on this subject, the therapist has pushed a client in a certain direction with pointed questions and interventions. Sometimes even hypnosis has been used. After a while the client concludes *Oh yes, I guess my father did rape me*. What a tragedy!

Arthur Janov has written that you should handle so called third line trauma before second and first line trauma. Because of this in the early years, many of us pushed our clients in that direction with our interventions and suggestions. That was wrong. I have discovered, along with others, that the most painful traumas emerge last, not in an age or time sequence. The body is able to handle the easiest traumas first, and then gradually descend to the more painful ones.

In my own case I had full access to my birth trauma for a couple of years. However, it was over ten years later that I accessed a much worse trauma that happened to me after I had been born. A person should be allowed to go where it seems to be right for them to go, rather than where their therapist might want to push them because of some supposed theory.

One time I had a couple come to me for marriage counseling. I could see that the woman was very, very anxious. After a few sessions I told the woman about my primal room downstairs and suggested that we go there. That was a mistake. I was pushing her too hard. She went to the primal room and in the dim light started a birth primal almost immediately. I was astonished. In those days, I thought it was a good thing to do. Unfortunately, the marriage situation didn't get any better, but in fact it got worse. Finally in desperation I made a home visit. I found the mother with many, many children around and a baby in her arms.

The house was a complete shambles. Everything was wrong. Dishes were piled high in the sink; beds were unmade and children were racing around the house crying. Birth primalling was not what she needed at that time. I had pushed her in the wrong direction too soon. The husband refused to pay me for my work. He was right. It was a hard, but important lesson for me.

F. Inappropriate touching and improper physical contact by the therapist is very bad therapy.

At one of the group meetings at the International Primal Association Annual Convention, a relatively new therapist asked about touching and holding a client during a session. All present said, *Don't do it*, unless you have a witness present or video tape the session. This may seem a bit extreme but truthfully, over the years this has been a big problem for primal practitioners. Suffering and controversy has gone on for years and years related to this subject. It is very tricky and very important.

There is no doubt that certain past traumas can only be accessed through touching and physical contact. This certainly includes birth primals, sexual abuse and things like that. Two of my most important birth primals included a body temperature pool and physical contact. But this kind of activity must be done absolutely right and safely.

This issue has been a definite limit to primal and caused a lot of trouble over the years. At the present time, there are laws about physical contact in various states which limit primal work even more. That is why the group mentioned above said, *Don't do it*.

But, to uncover and resolve many difficult traumas, physical contact must take place. This is a hard time to do primal therapy. There are a lot of limits to primal in this area of physical contact.

G. The hard bust should not be attempted by a therapist.

In the early years there was a lot of talk about *the hard bust*. This is when a therapist would say or do something that pushed the client to open up in a very dramatic way. I tried it several times. Sometimes it would work other times not. One experience I had was with a World War II veteran who was raised with an alcoholic mother. I connected his war experience with his childhood and said the words: *go get the beer under the bed*. It turned out to be a hard bust, all right. My client went ballistic. Great, I thought. But he never came back again. I had pushed too hard. Bad mistake.

One time I attended a Holotropic Session after having chemotherapy for cancer. Previously, I had had a good experience with Holotropic work, so I thought it would be OK to do it again. However, the Holotropic guidelines are very clear. They firmly state that you shouldn't do Holotropic work after a serious illness, surgery, etc. Foolishly, I disregarded these guidelines and went ahead with the all day Holotropic session.

That experience turned out to be a hard bust for me. I regressed to a state of total need. I could not control myself at all. Fortunately, I was able to get some good therapy immediately. My wife, Ginny, and brother, Allen, helped me a lot. My doctor put me on medication for about a year. It took four long years before I would even think about resuming my primal work. The hard bust is a mistake. I don't recommend it at all.

Much more could be and should be written on this subject. But the point that I am trying to make is that a major limit to primal over the years has been mistakes, errors and limitations of the therapists, myself included.

II. Errors and Limitations of the Client Limit Primal Work.

A. Many clients who have read *The Primal Scream* have unrealistic expectations for their therapy.

Many clients come into therapy because of reading *The Primal Scream*. Some of these persons believe that the key is to scream. Some people believe in a magical *cure* by doing primal. These people have unrealistic expectations for their sessions, which unless corrected, definitely limits their work.

An extremely intelligent man came to me to do primal therapy. He had read the book and was convinced the therapy was right for him. We went to the primal room in my basement. He lay on the mat in the dim light and started to scream. This surprised me. I tried to intervene and find out what he was screaming about. He couldn't really say what he was feeling. He said screaming made him feel better. I noticed right away that his screaming was forced and not at all natural. After a while I observed that at the end of his forced screaming he would always cough. Forced screamand cough. Forced scream.....and cough.

After observing this for awhile, I started to tell him that I thought the most authentic part of his session was his cough, not the forced scream. I told him that being authentic was the goal, not screaming. He really didn't like my saying that. But gradually, he caught on, and things began to go a little better.

Eventually, this client agreed to attend an IPA convention. He was a fine athlete. We had fun together at the IPA baseball game.

However, at meal times he always sat alone. I tried to befriend and help him. But too late, or not enough; he got scared and said *goodbye*. He left the convention early. I never saw him again.

B. Clients who do not follow good advice limit their success.

Some clients do not follow the good advice of a therapist and wonder why the therapy is not working. After my personal primal sessions I would always need a couple of hours of rest. Also I found that taking time before a primal session to meditate and get ready was helpful. Some clients would not or could not take my advice to do this.

One person came to me for primal therapy, but he would only come on his lunch hour! I advised against this arrangement. He insisted. I gave in. He came for his primal session from a hectic office. He returned from his primal session to a hectic office. Obviously, this couldn't work. It didn't.

Some clients need to change their eating habits and do more physical exercise. Some people need to find a job or a different job. Some people need some help with their *significant other*. Some people need friends to support them. Advice on this level is sometimes rejected because the client insists all they need to do is *primal*. This is just not true. Leading a good strong life helps you descend into the depths of difficult buried traumas.

I often told my clients that primalling is like being a deep sea diver. If you have a fine boat, good pumps, good lines, expert staff, and good equipment you will be able to descend deep into the ocean depths. But if you only have a little air in your lungs you can't go deep at all. To go deep inside yourself you need a lot of outside support. This is where the *Boston Study Group*, the IPA and my family and friends helped me so much as I did my personal primal work. Unfortunately, a lot of clients don't follow common sense advice to improve their lives now. All they want to do is *primal*. These clients have limited or no success.

C. The aggressive client poses a difficult situation.

Some clients are so furious, angry and aggressive that they pose a special problem for the primal therapist. Because our mantra is *go with your feelings*, we are likely to get into trouble eventually with such a client.

I had one client who announced to me that he *hated everybody*. He was truly a furious person. He would hit and bang and shout and scream. He said that he was so mad at his parents that he was determined not to get well so that they could see him *suffer for the rest of his life*. He saved his worst venom especially for himself. He had a dark black coat that he stuffed with a blanket and a pillow for a face. That was him. He would hit and hit that figure in the corner. He raged, session after session.

After awhile he lost his job and couldn't pay for his sessions any more. I had a rule not to let a client go more than \$100 in debt to me. But due to my own weakness I let this client build up a debt of \$1,000. When he finally did get a job, I asked him to start paying again. This made him furious and he never returned. I never got my \$1,000. I found out later that during his lay-off he had continued buying alcohol. He could pay the liquor store, but he couldn't pay me! He *hated everybody*. That included himself and me. Quite a lesson.

Over the years, I have talked with many primal therapists. I know that in their hearts they are well meaning, kind persons; not however of course, without fault. No one, myself included, is without fault. I know that some of these therapists have been terribly mistreated by their very aggressive clients. This is sad but true.

Primal therapy is dangerous work because some clients are determined to get their way no matter what. One such client said to her therapist: *I am determined to get somebody to take care of me*. The therapist noted this down in his notes. To his surprise some years later, that same client came after him for a large sum of money on some trumped up charges. Fortunately, this therapist kept extensive records and the case never went to court. The client was clearly wrong in her charges. But this experience was quite discouraging to a well meaning and honest therapist.

D. Primalling can be used as a defense by a client rather than to heal.

Years ago a new member came in to *The Boston Study Group*. He was intelligent, charming and a good business man. He had qualities that we liked and needed. But after a while we heard things about him we didn't like. We suspected him of abusing his female clients. One special meeting we confronted this person with our suspicions. He avoided our questions and then

started to primal. He used primalling to escape our confrontation. After that meeting this person never attended another study group. Years later we learned that he was in jail for client abuse.

I have heard reports of clients primalling for years on the same subject. One report I heard was that this person primalled over a thousand times about his birth. Later this person turned to religion and away from therapy. No wonder. Such persons can be called *primal junkies*. Primalling can become addictive just like anything else.

E. Primal is limited by clients who decide that emerging feelings and thoughts are too painful, too embarrassing or too difficult.

One client said to me when a sexual abuse scene was emerging: *I went through this once already why should I do it again?* I know of at least two primallers who stopped therapy when some scenes of being hit were emerging. One of my clients when she was 4 years old pulled on her mother's dress for a little attention. But by pulling on her dress a pot of boiling water tipped over right on top of her. This was a major trauma of course. After a while this scene started to emerge but when it did she became completely tired and had to go to bed and rest day after day. My client was OK with the process, but her husband didn't believe in it. Eventually my client stopped the therapy unfinished. One of my clients worked for two years to get into feelings. Eventually he did have a strong abreaction on the subway! But this episode scared him so much that he quit the therapy.

III. Cultural and Other Factors Limit Primal

A. Certain cultural groups do not trust psychotherapy, especially *primal*.

During the 1980's I used to play basketball with a group of men in my home town of Saugus, Massachusetts. One day someone asked me what I did for a living. I simply mentioned that I practiced psychology. The guys all around said, "Whooo....whooo...." and made google eyes at me. No way would my basketball friends ever see a counselor or therapist.

One of my friends works for a trucking firm. He tells me that all his coworkers think that psychology and therapy is bunk.

When I had my 50th high school reunion I told some of my old classmates that I did primal therapy. They didn't say anything, but looked at me as if I were a bit crazy.

B. The Black Experience may limit primal.

I once mentioned to someone in the IPA that it was a shame we didn't have more black members. They said that they believed that blacks do well just to get through life. Blacks can't take the time or the luxury of looking back with therapy. I don't know if this is true or not, but it could be.

C. Old Age and Death limit primal.

Some people have been so traumatized that it would take several lifetimes to iron it all out at the rate we do therapy today.

D. Some people need full time therapy for the work to succeed.

Some people are so damaged that I see no way they could be helped with primal except in a full time therapeutic setting. Hopefully this will be available some day.

E. Shock limits primal.

Last summer at the IPA convention I took a workshop by Terry Larimore on Shock. She said that there are certain persons that are so deeply traumatized that the primal process in the usual way just doesn't work. I have not studied all the ins and outs of shock, but I believe what she said is true. Severe shock can be a serious limit to primal.

Conclusion

In conclusion, primal work can be of an enormous help to people, but it does have important limits due to the therapist, the client, and other factors.

A major problem is one of arrogance. If we say that primal is always the only or best way, we are arrogant and wrong. This is because primal has many limits as we have seen above.

Many avenues lead to better emotional and physical health. I am sure one of them is to uncover and resolve old trauma as we do in primal therapy. But as we have seen above, it is not always possible to do this because of severe limits. Therefore, in humility and strength let us go forward doing what we know to be true, as well as honoring the work, efforts, skills, and methods of others.

Addendum

The above text states, "A person who lives alone and has no friends should not attempt to primal." Alex Tadeskung responded to this statement with the following contribution, which contains the comment, "I believed, correctly, that being alone was the safest and best way for me to begin my healing."

Thank you, Alex, for this important contribution and enrichment of the subject. I welcome others who read this document to write me with their truths and their story. Send your comments, additions, story, or thoughts to:

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My Story

by Alex Tadeskung

For years, I had suffered with overwhelming fear and anxiety. In 1979, shortly after my mother died, I started therapy. I spent most of my early sessions crying and feeling depressed or angry and blaming everyone in my life for my problems. My therapist suggested that I see a Psychiatrist and go on medication. I fired that therapist. I somehow knew he couldn't handle my pain, so I fired him. No one was going to medicate me to shut me up! Next, I found a woman therapist who was great. For the first time in my life, I began to trust someone. As my walls started to come down, I began to have memories and flashbacks of my early childhood.

My pain and anxiety intensified and my therapist suggested I get a restraining order against my father, explaining that this would help me feel safe. I hadn't seen my father in 2 years and couldn't understand how this was going to help. But I did it anyway and to my amazement, my fear and anxiety lessened and I felt empowered for the first time in my life. I slowly stopped seeing each member of my family (one sister and 3 brothers) because they wanted me to stop crying and get myself back on track. They didn't want me to change. However, I knew that if I didn't change, I would die. So I stayed away. Losing my family was painful but not as painful as losing myself. So being alone allowed me to build my self-esteem and love myself.

As I continued to heal, I was unable to work most days. So, consequently, I was fired from my job. At the same time, I ended a five-year love relationship. For the first time in my life, I was alone. I went into a deep depression and spent most days in bed crying. At the time, I believed, correctly, that being alone was the safest and best way for me to begin my healing because no one was trying to stop me from having my feelings or trying to fix me. I was alone and I was having my feelings. Oh! Was I having my feelings!!

As I continued in therapy, my therapist recommended a career counselor and suggested that I go to college. With the help of both counselors, I returned to college. Everyday I got myself out of bed and went to school. How I was able to keep it together, I'll never know, but I did. I continued to do individual and group therapy three times a week.

My therapist closed her center in 1995 and I felt completely lost. Next, I found a therapist at Catholic Charities and that lasted 3 months. Then I had the good sense to fire her. From there I went to a therapist at DSS and that was worse. Again I had a therapist with whom I was not able to have my feelings. Finally, after many months, I found a primal therapist and for the first time in my life, I was able to go into the depths of my pain and anger. Thank you ...

So you can see from my story, sometimes it's better to be alone with your feelings until you find someone who is willing and able to support your particular path. And I do agree that outside support is a very important part of healing when the group and therapist can provide a safe container. Hearing other people tell their stories lets you know you are not alone and in the end we need to be connected to people.