

PRIMAL STORIES

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Primal Stories is dedicated to primal therapist and early IPA Board Member Arnold Buchheimer, PhD.

INTRODUCTION

It's Not Just About Screaming!

It has happened a number of times in my life that, when I've mentioned to someone that I'm going on a primal retreat or to the yearly primal convention, this person will say: "Primal! Isn't that where you scream?" Well, I felt put in the awkward position of saying, "No, no, it's not just about screaming; it is about all feelings!" And these feelings might include sadness, fear, loneliness or worthlessness, and, yes, sometimes anger or terror that might result in a scream. The persistent focus that people have that primal is "screaming" seems to go back to the popular book published in 1970, "The Primal Scream" by Arthur Janov. Ironically, I've heard that the title of the book was given by Janov's publisher, not by the author himself. I wonder if Janov was totally in agreement with that title, which in my mind is too limiting and makes primal sound radical and extreme?

It is not at all that, but it is not for everybody either. Most therapies—from Psychoanalysis to cognitive therapies to deep-feeling therapies—have had successes. It is very subjective what a person feels is best for him or her, added to the judgment of a skilled practitioner who has a sense of how ready, willing and able a client is to go into deep feelings.

Because of this, I've wanted to work with other members of the IPA to write a booklet of stories that would help describe the actual process, especially focusing on how the writer felt the technique seemed to have helped them make improvements in their lives. And, you can see in these stories, that it wasn't just about screaming, it was about feeling!

Bill Gronwald, Editor

PRIMAL INTEGRATION THERAPY

By Barbara A. Bryan, MA, MSW

Primal Therapy was introduced in 1970 in *The Primal Scream* by Arthur Janov, and in the 45 years since, many practitioners have contributed to the evolution of his ideas. The International Primal Association has adopted the term, “Primal Integration” to describe our current beliefs and practices.

Primal Integration is based on a natural phenomenon that has been recognized and used over recent decades with roots in the works of Mesmer, Charcot, Liebeault, Janet, Breuer, Freud, Reich, Rank, Jung, Perls, Lake, Swartley, Farrant, and Grof, as well as Janov. Briefly, it is a letting go of conscious control of the body and emotions, which opens the unconscious to awareness. This allows insights to emerge which have a healing value.

To quote Janov, “A Primal experience is the reliving of those early life events during which the child turned off his primal needs and pain and developed a personality split and an unreal self.” There is a “knowing” inside each of us about what we need to do to become whole again and actualize our potential. This knowing is part of the power within us all, the inner child, the spark of self that we need to acknowledge and nurture. There are various ways to get in touch with this source of inner strength; some are spontaneous and some are guided. In Primal, we learn to trust the process and eventually to trust our own inner wisdom to guide us on our journey.

A Primal can be described as a feeling experience that may start with a here-and-now distress, such as being upset and angry with an authority figure. As clients are encouraged to express these feelings, they may find the feelings taking over. There usually is a sense of giving oneself permission to “go with it.” During that process, there may be a flash or vision from the past, which could involve a parental

figure in a memory scene. Then, if the client feels safe enough, he or she may re-experience a traumatic event and experience the feelings from the past. A connection is made between that scene and the present. This generally will release the energy from the current situation and the client is able to function better. The more we can express our anger and pain in an appropriate environment, the more we can open up to love and our own power within.

Through this work, we have learned that regression and experiencing deeply held repressed memories is healing on a core level. Now scientists are catching up and validating our beliefs. They now propose that traumatic, repressed memories are held in the deepest recesses of the brain (the amygdala) and an intense cathartic experience will allow them to be conscious. Once acknowledged, the energy and hold they had over one’s life is ended. Often this is an “aha” moment, and one’s life changes in subtle but important ways.

The International Primal Association was founded in 1973 and has been active with a week-long summer convention and retreat and a four-day spring retreat every year. Everyone is welcome to come and experience primal work and enjoy various relevant workshops, group work, and fun. Social Workers can earn CEUs. Go to www.primals.org to find out more about the IPA.

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D G: My Very First Primal Session

We're talking the first week of November 1991. I go into Dr. W's building and in the basement all the walls are padded, and mattresses are every-where. I lie down and Dr. W. suggests that I delve into an experience that is maybe a few years ago. I pick the time that a girlfriend ignored me at her family party. I simply went, "Heidi, you're ignoring me." And then I kept asking, "Why?" That's when the spasmodic breathing, and convulsions occurred, and eventually screaming and bellowing. There was also gagging, which Dr. W. said was attributed to birth. This went on for about fifteen minutes. Afterwards, I noticed the following changes:

- Immediate body relief to a great degree with some areas still tight. My chest and back were the most relieved.
- I stopped chewing gum and sucking on sweet candies.
- Compulsive spending (including for CDs)---gone. I would walk into record stores and browse...but not buy. I did not physically need to own this stuff so much.
- I stopped looking into the mirror incessantly. And now when I do look into the mirror, I am separate from the reflection I see. Before I was "one" with the reflection. Perhaps unhealthy Narcissism was occurring when I felt I had to look into the mirror to feel good about myself instead of physically feeling at ease.
- I no longer folded my arms, which some would say is defensive behavior.
- On a windy day, I could feel the wind on my back. Since my chest and back had relented, I was more open to feel.

What I believe primal does is to modify or remove repetitive, compulsive, ritualistic behaviors, so that the individual can experience other parts of life. Not spending money all the time allowed me to put away money for a holiday or vacation club. I became more moderate.

BG: A Life Changing Story

Many years ago I had an eight-day intensive—three- or four-hour primal sessions daily—with Arnold Buchheimer, a Primal Therapist who was one of the founders of the IPA. I had been triggered by the loss of my Manhattan apartment where I had lived for more than 30 years. Developers were taking down my building and others to construct a 60-story luxury tower. With the impending loss of my "nest," I thought my life was over.

I became seriously anxious and depressed. My recently retired mother returned to New York to take care of me. I thought I might end up, one more time, in a psychiatric hospital. Out of desperation, I called Arnold who I saw briefly several years earlier before he moved out of state. Arnold felt I had come to a point in my life in which I was "ready, willing and able" to deal with core issues and he offered a primal intensive for me. Within a few days, I was on an Amtrak train to stay with him for a week.

On the fourth day, with some prodding, nudging and lots of support from Arnold, the terrors came pouring out. I experienced feeling like a two-year-old in the snow with no clothes, no shelter, no warmth, no food and no other human being to take care of me. For almost an hour I trembled and sobbed like a helpless child. Arnold gently put his hand on my chest as I lay on a mat, and I calmed down enough for this two-hour morning session to wind down.

As Arnold was preparing lunch that day, I remember asking: "Do you mean that all these terrors I was feeling are from the past, that all these awful things are not going to happen to me, especially not all at one time?" He helped me understand that I had to survive just one day at a time. I only needed to prepare one meal at a time, not all my meals for the rest of my life. It came down to "one day at a time; one meal at a time."

I had spent my life so terrified of all I thought I had to do to take care of myself that I became paralyzed and could do nothing. At the end of the intensive, when I returned to New

York, I knew something in me had changed. In those eight days, I met a strong part of myself who could take care of the frightened two-year-old all alone in the snow!

As soon as I returned home, I started to look for a place to live. Within two months, I was able to pack up, relocate and get on with my life. Yes, I remained in therapy, but its focus was more to lead a fulfilling life and not just to survive.

* * * * *

What was it about the Primal technique that helped me? I had 20 years of talk therapy before Primal and maybe that was the problem! I talked and talked...but I did *not* feel. Primal helped me get into the many troubling feelings just below the surface. The therapist would have me start with deep breathing, sometimes guiding that with his hand on my chest. He would then ask me to add sounds when I exhaled. Somehow these sounds became feelings. More feelings came out, and then, almost magically, I opened my eyes and said, "I'm okay now!" We talked about the troubling feelings I had expressed, which were invariably connected to early traumas. Something painful was closer to being resolved. This process was repeated a number of times. My body and mind seemed to know how much I could handle each session. The therapy has been going on for years, and there are many bumps in the road, but somehow it has worked for me!

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DK: Feeling the Grieving

I am a graduate of Cornell University's Nursing School with a IBSN, practicing as an RN while becoming a mother. Later, I earned my Master's Degree from Syracuse University as a Marriage and Family Therapist, still practicing over 25 years. I have always believed that therapists need to be working on their own emotional pain in order to provide the best care for their own clients. Therefore, I have experienced various types of therapy; but it wasn't until the mid 90's when my marriage tore my heart open to a place I had not known existed in me. I was sobbing and stomping my feet like a toddler, and soon became aware and connected to the pain of my childhood in a very primal way. No longer just an intellectual understanding of my triggered feelings - but actually FEELING the grieving process that was accelerated by attending the Primal Center in Venice, California, for a year.

Fortunately, I've never needed medications for anxiety or depression - yet this primal process allowed me to heal deeply by ridding me of my anger, amazingly...and allowing a compassion more authentic than I had ever known. Deeper, more profound LOVE. Also, as I grow older, my health continues to be improving in small ways. I am more flexible than I was in my twenties!

For my clients, by feeling their childhood pain or adult traumas, dysfunctions - several diagnosed as bipolar - no longer need medications because they know and experience their repressed feelings that had been repressed and finally feel heard. "There is a sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness, but of power. They speak more eloquently than ten thousand tongues. They are messengers of overwhelming grief...and unspeakable love." Washington Irving.

BB: I Found ME!

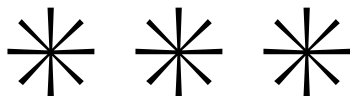
I dropped out of high school, pregnant, to get married at the age of 16. The marriage was difficult but I was totally in love and dedicated to my husband. After 30 years, he left me for a younger woman. I was devastated, and knew I had to explore some growth experiences outside of the home - meaning that I knew I needed therapy.

The therapist I found was coincidentally experimenting with Primal Therapy (It was 1971 and Janov's *The Primal Scream* had just come out). He encouraged me to express the anger and hurt I was feeling towards my husband by hitting a mat with a plastic bat. I did this repeatedly, then stopped and started to sob.

I knew I was experiencing something new and different from what I had learned in my social work studies.

This tremendous release of feelings took an enormous weight off my shoulders. I knew I was experiencing something new and different from what I had learned in my social work studies. I knew immediately this was the kind of therapy I needed.

I feel as if the primal process found me and not the other way around! Primal helped me get "ME" back. I spent the next 40 years helping others find their way with the primal process.



HG: A Slow Process

I was depressed and unhappy, but mostly functional, so neither I nor my parents really knew there was a problem. Still, I was aware enough when I was 20 years old to marry a psychologist who encouraged me to go into psychotherapy. The therapist didn't work out (nor did the marriage), but I continued to try various healing modalities of the blossoming "New Age," from Encounter Groups to Bio-energetics. None of these broke through my strong attachment to my defenses, especially anger and intellectualizing.

In the late 70s, I started working with Gro Robinson, a Primal Therapist who ran groups and individual sessions. At my first group in a darkened mattress-lined room, I watched in awe as the other attendees bawled and cried out, writhed and kicked. Finally I understood what the Bio-energeticist had failed to get across, how my feelings were a gateway to knowledge about myself and others, which my brain could never access just by thinking. I had relied on my brain to get me through my life, and that wasn't working very well. I was ecstatic that I had found another way to be in the world.

The basis of Primal is quite simple, arising from Freudian and Gestalt theories. As Arthur Janov postulated, early trauma and unmet needs affect our entire lives because infants and children repress the feelings resulting from these hurtful experiences as more than they can bear. They develop defense mechanisms or acting-out behaviors—such as my depression, anger and intellectualizing, or worse, drugs and other life-destroying addictions—in order to keep the dangerous and terrifying feelings unconscious.

In Primal Therapy's safe environment, we let adult feelings lead us into a full expression of the early feelings—a difficult process of overcoming resistance and facing up to fears—so that we can learn to accept the hurt child and let go of the defenses. The feelings will always be with us, perhaps in less potent form,

but with an understanding of what is really happening, we no longer need to act out.

I was fortunate that Gro introduced me to another talented practitioner, Al Pessio, whose Psychomotor System has proved to be a powerful adjunct to Primal. He taught me how to be with Ideal Parents, inner figures who could give my suffering inner child exactly what she needed, including support for her feelings, and serve as an antidote to the failings of my real parents.

For the expression of deep and early feelings to be truly healing, it needs to be observed and accepted by another person. Otherwise, it is no different than what many of us did as children, silently crying ourselves to sleep, alone in our beds. I have found that Ideal Parents serve this function almost as well as a real person—and sometimes better, because they always supply the precise accommodation that is needed. Ideal Parents cannot give physical support, although pillows and other props can be used for that, but they are always available.

Ideal Parents are also an important source of information about what happened to me as an infant and child. After a deep Primal experience, I don't always know why I felt so scared or so hurt. But when my Ideal Father says, "I would have protected you," or my Ideal Mother says, "I would have held you close to my body," then I know. They can provide the "integration" that Primal theory puts forth as an essential aspect of healing.

I have been working with therapists, friends, the IPA community (at two retreats a year), and my Ideal Parents for 35 years to acquire knowledge from my feelings. It has been a slow-moving campaign marked by many, many, small victories over defensive behaviors that are harmful to me. I now see the primal process as a "practice," like meditation. I need to continue to be in touch with my early feelings on a regular basis in order to remember why my defenses are no longer necessary.

JE: Whore of the World.

I had no female friends, and I could barely hold a job or take care of my children. In 1972 this began to change with the help of primal therapy. After reading *The Primal Scream*, I began therapy with Barb Bryan at The Primal Integration Center. Over the next five years, many of my repressed traumatic memories became conscious. One, in particular, helped me to add the friendship of women to my life.

I told Barb that when my two young sons teased me by grabbing my legs, I would go berserk. So we set up a scene in which she grabbed my legs as I lay on my back. Predictably, I became hysterical. I could not connect to any memory, but eventually, I discovered the source of my fear.

To remember how I felt as a child, I would often walk around my old neighborhood. I was afraid and angry, as if there was a bully around every corner. One day, as I stood in front of a neighbor's house two doors down from Grandma, an alarming memory slowly became conscious. When I told Grandma about it, she said, "That woman was crazy. Everybody knew she was sick."

I was five. I wasn't supposed to go there, but I went anyway to get some candy. The woman asked me to come in so she could pin up the hem on a jumper she was making as a birthday present for her niece. She put the jumper over my head and knelt down in front of me. Then, she reached up my leg and put her fingers inside my underpants and touched my vulva.

I wanted to kick her in the face, but I was so shocked, I didn't move. I looked at her and saw that she had pins sticking out of her mouth. With her unkempt black hair, she looked like an evil witch. I was furious that she dared to touch me where I wasn't even supposed to touch myself. Feeling powerless, I said nothing. She had taken over my body and cast an evil spell on me. Suddenly, she stood up, pulled the jumper off, and gave me some candy. I did not tell anyone what happened because I knew I would get punished for disobeying.

The next morning I went back. I wanted to go to the birthday party. I envisioned cake and ice cream and games with prizes. When the perpetrator came to the door, she scowled and told me to go away. “We don’t want people like you around here.” I was crestfallen and confused. During the birthday party, I slouched on her front steps feeling sorry for myself. I felt that everyone could see that I was bad. I imagined a large purple blanket covering me like a tent to hide me from judging eyes. At five years old, I didn’t know the words, but I felt like the “Whore of the World.”

At the primal center, Barb and I acted out this memory. She played the abuser by kneeling in front of me and reaching for my legs. I could barely let her touch me. She shouted at me, “We don’t want people like you around here.” I was overwhelmed by feelings of shame, rejection and powerlessness. The feelings rose up from my gut in cycles that continued until my body became exhausted. I lay quietly—regressed and sucking my thumb. Later, I asked Barb to hold me. Another time, to overcome the victim role, I kicked the padded wall while imagining it was the perpetrator—just like I had wanted to kick in her teeth when I was five. It felt good to finally stand up for myself.

After that I started to be comfortable with women. Two years later, I “came out” as a lesbian. Now, I have many women friends in my life, in particular my partner of 30 years.

One mentally ill person with words of blame and rejection-condemned me to 29 years of loneliness. Because of primal therapy, I have been saved from the control of repressed trauma, freeing me to live my life.



D A: Learning from Triggers

In 1978, during my work on a PhD in clinical psychology, I attended a seminar about how to assess children who presented as physically or sexually abused. During the class I had difficulty breathing and began shaking. When I was finally able to make it home, I curled up in a fetal position and began shaking violently. I had to put a washcloth between my teeth to prevent them from breaking. My husband, confused as he was, sat with me as I cycled through my first Primal emotional block.

During the next few weeks I talked to relatives about my childhood. One aunt said I was sexually abused by my step-

I . . . intuitively knew continuing “talk” therapy would not help me at this point.

grandfather at a pre-verbal age. My alcoholic mother casually stated she never wanted children and had tried to abort me with mustard douches.

I had read Janov’s *Primal Scream* and intuitively knew continuing in “talk” therapy would not help me at this point. My research led me to Barbara Bryan’s Primal Integration Center. Primal Therapy “peeled” away at my fears and emotional blocks. In the beginning it helped me accept my anxiety and live a reasonably productive life. As I gained strength I was able to regress and experience and resolve childhood trauma.

Today Primal is a tool I use when confusion arises in my personal or professional life. I get in touch with the underlying feeling, and the confusion dissipates. “Triggers” are now viewed as AFGO, Another Friggin’ Growth Opportunity.

AP: Beyond Talk Therapy

After 12 years of meeting weekly with a therapist to ‘talk out’ my problems, two years of Primal Therapy speeded up my healing process. Sure, re-framing and cognitive behavioral therapy can help immensely with eating disorders, depression and self-injurious behavior. But Primal Therapy allowed me to feel my feelings more intensely.

For two years, I participated in weekend therapy intensives at the Primal Integration Center of Michigan, attended support groups

. . . two years of Primal Therapy speeded up my healing process.

and IPA conventions and retreats, and met weekly with a primal ‘buddy,’ a friend who supported me in my feelings. The Primal Therapist was able to help me get into those deep feelings

through crying, hitting a bat against a punching bag, making sounds, moaning, and moving my body like a child having a temper tantrum. *Then*, the most important thing is integration.

Integration is allowing ourselves to feel *okay* in the here and now. To *know* we survived all sorts of life incidents. And that we are here now, and we’re okay. This is the part that goes beyond talk therapy.

When current day triggers come up, I repeat, “I’m here now, and I’m okay.” I practice mindfulness and have added healing meditations to my therapy. I continue seeing a talk therapist to help with daily struggles, yet I now know, through working in Primal Therapy that all is okay.

I am now fourteen years hospital-free.

I N T E R N A T I O N A L P R I M A L A S S O C I A T I O N

The purpose of the IPA is to explore, study, research, and promote forms of psychotherapy and growth that emphasize uncovering and resolving traumatic experiences through expressing unconscious feelings, and to develop a community that is congruent with the principles developed from this work.

As an all-volunteer, non-profit corporation, the IPA serves both the general public and its members by organizing annual retreats in the spring and summer, publishing a quarterly newsletter and other materials, engaging in promotional activities, supporting a certification program, and maintaining an extensive website www.primals.org.

If you would like to join, please go to www.primals.org/membership (scroll down) for an application. Membership perks include discounts and scholarship opportunities at events, participation in an on-line discussion group, inclusion in [a therapist referral list](#), and interaction with people seeking a new way of being with themselves and one another.

