

Marketing Holotropic Breathwork

The Pricing Debate

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Six writers produced a collection of essays on the issues of pricing, profit, service, consistency, and the integration of good business into good mission in providing Holotropic Breathwork workshops.

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Is Holotropic Breathwork to be a Birthright or a Profit Center?

Jim Compton-Schmidt, M.Div., C.M.P.

On the net¹ a wonderful discussion has broken out around the issue of charging for Holotropic Breathwork. The universal point of view on the issue of charging is that the free market should decide about our charges, and no one should tell anyone else what their practice should look like, as long as what we do is Holotropic Breathwork. Having said that, my practice should feel more like a Native American healing circle than an adjunct to psychotherapy (Jungian or otherwise).

Sometime during the discussion, someone suggested a \$100² posted minimum for a one-day workshop. Several responded that this amount seemed excessive since many were charging in the \$50 to \$75 range. The amount is irrelevant, as is the suggestion for a posted minimum. The question is how is the Grof message to be carried forward? Will Holotropic Breathwork become an elitist toy found in the same place in the history of Western healing as any other adjunctive option for standard psychiatry, practiced by a few professional Holotropic Breathwork Facilitators? Or will many people in many different places be carrying the message forward primarily on weekends as Facilitators who earn much of their living doing something else. You can probably figure how I feel and which delivery system I advocate.

Price may not be the only thing that separates us in this debate, but this issue stood out during this discussion as very divisive. There were hints that if we didn't raise our prices, the buying public would see our product as lacking in value (like low-cost, county-funded therapy compared to fee-for-service, private therapy).

There is room for both "wings on this bird" in our international practice of Holotropic Breathwork — room for both the professional "therapists" and the "shamanistic" practitioners, but we ought not to be judging one approach with the standards of the other. This would be very much like not confusing the "rules" of the hylotropic³ with those of the holotropic.

The Container Needs Heart and Regularity

Ed Willard

There are two things present within the container of the Grof Transpersonal Training modules. One is heart, without which the container wouldn't be worth a damn. Nobody can teach us about heart. All they can do is provide the safe, loving container, within which each one of us can hopefully find the way to her or his own. I think the second one that I consider to be key in providing the safe container is regularity. Breathing and Sitting often. Now, of course there are lots of us who can fulfill the first part of the formula, that has to do with providing an atmosphere of non-judgment within which people can feel safe enough to go deep. The second part is the problem nobody has yet been able to solve — regularity. My contention is that unless any region has workshops happening on a regular basis, Holotropic Breathwork is never going to find its way out of obscurity.

On to the issue of charging for Breathwork. Thomas Brightman (see below) says that, unless folks were paying \$100 or thereabouts for workshops, they wouldn't place a lot of value on the product. I can think of lots of words to use, but I will just say, "hogwash." Now I am going to back up and say that that point would be well taken in some contexts. But not in the context of Holotropic Breathwork. The fact is that very few folks are willing to pay \$100 to try something new. If they were willing to pay this much then why aren't the many Facilitators in the Bay Area of San Francisco creating waiting lists and turning people away?

My first point is that we should be charging less for workshops. Why? Just to get people to come in the first place. If a lot of people do not start giving Holotropic Breathwork a shot, I do not see that the Breathwork has much chance of spreading.

My next point is likely to be even more controversial. Another question: Who does Holotropic Breathwork? I don't know what it's like in your area, but I'd bet the San Francisco Bay Area is as good a sample case as any. Here it's the white upper middle class. Well-off Marinites,⁴ who skip a tennis game from time to time to try out inner exploration. Somebody can blast me if I'm wrong, but I'd say that ninety percent of the population attending workshops here is from the sector we call white upper middle class. My point is that they can afford \$100. The San Francisco Bay Area is a melting pot of Asians and Hispanics. The city of Oakland is something like two-thirds African American. It's sad, but everyone knows that it's also true that the economic level of these populations mostly doesn't come under the heading of upper middle class. Another population that does not come under this heading is students. Most students are young people willing to try out something new.

It is my intuition that there is a vast market out there just waiting to be tapped. (Now, about three months after this writing I have a small "test case" to submit.) Recently I posted approximately 60 flyers and, from this posting, received four phone calls and two emails. From these six responses, one man

participated in a workshop and most likely will repeat. I think that the key is in making the Breathwork affordable. We need to make the phones ring, and I am hazarding a bet, that this “new market” I am talking about here can yield a lot of fruit. I don’t have anything against the people who make up the “old market.” We can continue to pass them around amongst us by making use of mailing lists and so on. But we need new blood.

Now, do not get me wrong. I am not trying to tell anyone what he or she should be charging. But the formula that people have been using has not been working very well, if what we want to do is to spread Holotropic Breathwork.

Integrate the Business Aspect of Breathwork into Our Mission

Ray Kelly

The opinions of individuals in any debate are filtered through environmental learnings which create the worldview. Imagine if Mother Teresa of Calcutta had tried to resolve an issue with Donald Trump,⁵ that depended on the definition of “wealth”. Imagine both of them assuming the other person understood wealth as they do.

The Breathwork pricing debate on Holo-Cert started as an analysis of the survival of Breathwork as a business. A business assumes a profit after all costs. The rate charged will vary according to criteria set by the practitioner. However, it is critical to have a benchmark rate that, if achieved, will cover expenses, as well as making a living for the practitioner.

For a moment, we should separate the practicalities of the business world from the dedication of our hearts. After all, if the work does not survive, the heart cannot reach as far as it might. Once we have fully analyzed the business aspect of Breathwork we must reintegrate its worth into our sense of mission.

Let us take Stan Grof and the Grof Transpersonal Training (GTT) as an example. Stan has set a rate for his Training that incorporates expenses he deems necessary to provide proper set and setting, meals, staff, transportation, equipment, and the value he places on his own time. He also makes assumptions on participation levels that will generate the gross revenue to cover these expenses. As costs change, the rate must eventually change. However, the rate is a standard around which value revolves. All barter is based on this benchmark rate. If the rate is too low, there could be no barter or scholarships and the quality of the Training could suffer. If it is set too high, it may reduce the amount of benchmark participants on whom the Training relies.

This is the magic of business. Set a realistic rate today and adjust accordingly. Don’t think you can establish expectations in current participants and change them (raise the rates) later. It doesn’t work. If you consider

Breathwork as an avocation and not as a business, then you may live by different criteria.

Shifting Beliefs

Stephen Dinan, M.A.

In this article, I will bring in a little mainstream psychology to frame the pricing issue in a psychological context. The concept I will use is called cognitive dissonance, which can be elaborately explained, but boils down to: *we tend to subconsciously change our beliefs so that they agree with other cognitions, beliefs, emotions, and behaviors.* For example, studies have shown that children who are given lots of money for good grades tend to view learning as less worthwhile for its own sake. In their minds, they search for what is motivating them to study, and the money is seen as sufficient in itself. Paid less money, they will actually tend to enjoy learning more for its own sake. Their beliefs about why they are studying actually change.

How does this relate to pricing? Let's say that someone (like myself) is just starting out. He feels a bit insecure in his Facilitating skills, worries about competition, doubts his authority, or wants to attract new people. So he charges a minimal price, or even only asks for a donation. Cognitive dissonance says that his beliefs will move to equalize. His subconscious process might be something like this: "The reason people came is because of price, not because my time or set-up is inherently worth it." The low price reinforces fears and inadequacies, because it gives an outer reason to explain why people have come.

On the other end, a Breather who has paid a minimal amount must deal with two simultaneous cognitions. On the one hand, he has probably had a very interesting, healing, and deep journey into inner realms; he has benefited in some way. However, he must reconcile this with having paid a minimal amount for the experience. Cognitive dissonance predicts that his first cognition (it was a healing, valuable experience) will tend to equalize with the second. After a few days, he will, at least in his outer mind, tend to actually believe that the experience was less worthwhile, even if his deepest self knows differently. He will be less likely to speak glowingly to friends about the experience, less likely to buy books on the subject, less likely to return — all because we have done him a disservice by underpricing.

So what is the right price? From the perspective of cognitive dissonance, the right price for the Breather is the maximum one that the Breather can pay and still come. When a Breather has had to stretch a bit, she will be more motivated and enthusiastic over the long haul. For when she has spent more money, her cognitive process will reinforce her belief that it was a valuable experience. However, \$70 might be a stretch for a low-income secretary and \$200 is chump-change for an investment banker.

The right price for the Facilitator to charge is the one which reinforces the belief that her time is valuable, that her training has been useful, and

that people are motivated to work with her. A higher price will actually bolster her confidence in her work, which in turn may make her a better Facilitator, less anxiety-ridden, and more present. However, too high a price will, like the above example with children, perhaps lead her to ascribe her motivation to money rather than helping others. Though this has yet to happen with Breathwork Facilitators that I know of, it is conceivable that someone could garner enough star status, clout, or reputation so as to be able to charge a great deal and still attract participants. This in turn might lead to a subconscious shifting of beliefs, such that natural enthusiasm drains away.

So, with the simple mainstream psychological tool of cognitive dissonance, the best pricing structure involves charging the most possible, without pricing clients out of the market. Better for the Facilitator and actually better for the Breathers. However, from this regular price, it seems fair to give a sliding scale to those who want to come, but really cannot afford the higher price. I would bet, though, that even here, asking for a stretch is better than saying, "Just donate whatever you can." Ask them how much they can afford and if they say \$50, ask in return, "Can you stretch it to \$60?" They most likely can, and the mere fact of asking them to stretch benefits both parties; they value it more and you have not chipped away at the value of yourself as Facilitator.

This piece is an elaborate way to say, "Charge what the market will bear." Who said mainstream psychology was a waste of time?

Pricing Philosophies

Don Baker, C.M.T.

Breathwork skill is the most important aspect of your marketability. How good are you? And how can you improve?

How accomplished are you at managing group dynamics? This skill serves as the foundation of your Holotropic practice. You may be able to get by with less than stellar musical programming or focused bodywork, but if you can't handle a high-powered group of clients (and all of the interpersonal idiosyncrasies or inflexibilities they bring with them) they probably won't be back.

Good group management is based on well-developed communication skills. If you have trouble communicating, you're going to have problems managing a group. Consider joining Toastmaster's. Get a video camera and talk to it often. Find someone to coach you in group dynamics or take some classes.

Profit Keeps Holotropic Breathwork Available

Thomas Merton Brightman

Profit is not a foul word. Without provider profit for services rendered it is unlikely that there would be many certified Holotropic Breathwork practitioners or places to practice our healing art. Legal entities called non-profit and not-for-profit companies and charities do have an internal “margin-of-profit”. They provide living wages to members and acquire technology, equipment, *etc.* to sustain their organization. What kind of a Holotropic Breathwork community/organization will we be able and willing to sustain without income with which to work? Think of all the providers who earned a profit while providing you the opportunity to be educated and certified, so that you can now clothe and house yourself. In the length of a column, the best I can do is to ask questions and put forth my experience to encourage dialogue on each practitioner’s pricing and promotion.

A recent Holo-Cert suggestion was to establish a “suggested retail” for like formats of Holotropic Breathwork. Howls went up! Yet, I see some merit in a “suggested price”. I also support having a marketing module in Certification. “Suggested,” is the operative word. Everyone I know discounts their fee, gives scholarships, and sometimes does Holotropic Breathwork for free. A suggested price could be an indication of value and a support for the “real” cost of offering Holotropic Breathwork. It could aid those who cannot afford to subsidize expense. It would be a beginning guide, an assist to those who say they have difficulty setting a price and don’t record their true expenses. In practice, a practitioner can assist a specific person with price consideration — doing so is even a part of our AHBI [Association for Holotropic Breathwork Association] Ethical Agreements.

Pricing impacts perception of value

What could people think and feel, when the same duration workshop is given away by one person, offered for \$75 by another, and priced at \$125 by a third. Each Facilitator is certified by the same organization and holds out the same benefits and format.

The first person says: “This is my way of serving. I want to give this process away. I don’t care about the money. I want anyone who wants to do Holotropic Breathwork to get it for free. I don’t need a rented space. I’ll do it on my living room floor.” This person is willing to give away their time and talent. This is laudable and needs no defense or apology. The second person says: “If I keep the price low, more people will do the work. There are a lot of people who would benefit from Breathwork, but who cannot afford it. After all, I have my “other job” for income. I only do a workshop once a month at most.” Sounds like a good goal, does it not? The less it costs the more it will be used — right. Holotropic Breathwork is not this person’s primary income. It is a form of service and personal exploration — a sharing of their excitement for what they, personally, got out of this work. The third person says: “To

establish a set and setting, which, in my experience, maximizes the benefits of Holotropic Breathwork, I need to make a profit. An ideal setting is expensive. How will I afford to advertise, provide current music, quality food, a residential setting, 24-hour coverage, a regular schedule that people can rely on for long-term work, printed materials, postage, telephone costs, credit card fees, *etc.* I need a price that covers these expenses. I want lots of people to do this work, and I believe that the better the experience, the better the reputation of the process. I'd really like to do this as my job and principal service to my community." This person sees a higher price and a vocational commitment as a way to get more people to do the work.

What are you doing and what do you believe to be appropriate for you and your community? One person used Holo-Cert to gather research about who was doing what. The person asked members to share their information on pricing, registrations, workshop frequency, *etc.* As soon as hard numbers were requested, there was 'cybersilence' — you could have heard a pin drop on the moon. It appears that less than 5% of certified practitioners derive their major income from Holotropic Breathwork. The largest number of Facilitators do Holotropic Breathwork as an adjunct to their therapy or massage practices; as an offering at their holistic centers; or as an avocational service with occasional income.

The most repeated complaint I hear, after people have called several practitioners on certification lists, is the lack of regularly scheduled workshops. They report that those they have called say, "You put a group together, and I'll do a [one] workshop for you." Some of these are therapists, and they express concern that their clients would begin Holotropic Breathwork as an adjunct to therapy and then not be able to do it frequently enough or be able to rely on its continuance. Is this lack of availability related to the small number of people who earn an income from Holotropic Breathwork? Is it related to fears about pricing and marketing in general? Some say strongly that Holotropic Breathwork "should" not be marketed.

Two big issues for me are: 1) How is Holotropic Breathwork viewed today in the world? And, 2) What will be its availability in the future? I believe that pricing, marketing, and public education are key ingredients in this evolving equation. My viewing point is that public education — growing worldwide awareness — of the Holotropic Breathwork process and its benefits is essential to acceptance and accessibility. Pricing that could yield a profit, support higher professional dues for AHBI, foster a professional Holotropic Breathwork journal, permit widely-distributed, high quality, printed educational materials, promote features and benefits, deepen acceptance, and widen accessibility is a matter worth collaboration and cooperation.

Editor's notes

¹ Holo-Cert, the listserv for Holotropic Breathwork practitioners.

² Dollar amounts are, of course, 1997 quotes.

³ *Hylotropic* is Grof's word for the opposite of *holotropic*. Hylotropic means moving toward dualistic form, a complementary movement to the *holotropic* movement toward the formless whole.

⁴ Marin County has a high per-capita income and is located just north of San Francisco, CA.

⁵ A wealthy US investor.