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... studies in the enhancement of intimacy  
and bonding for the clinical practitioner

*Special Issue*

**The Personhood  
of the Therapist**



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# The Nature of Personhood: Interview with Jean McLendon

Barbara Jo Brothers

**EDITOR'S NOTE.** "Personhood" is a term invented by Virginia Satir as a way of referring to the unique essence of each particular human being. Honoring personhood was the core of Virginia's work. Jean McLendon was studying with Virginia when I first met her in 1970. Later, she became one of Virginia's most trusted colleagues; Virginia asked Jean to take her place in leading the eighth Process Community in 1988, when Virginia was unable to continue because of illness. The following interview took place August 2, 1999.

**SUMMARY.** Interview of Jean McLendon by Barbara Jo Brothers on the nature of personhood. Included are concepts from the work of Virginia Satir, thoughts about the importance of heart energy, ways of connecting "at the essence" point, and tapping into the personhood of both therapist and client. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>>]

**KEYWORDS.** Personhood, person, essence, heart energy, interpersonal process patterns, pleasure, pain

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*PERSONHOOD, HEALING, AND HEART ENERGY*

BJB: Virginia Satir believed the concept of personhood is essential to healing in family therapy. Give us some of your ideas on the “how-to’s” of good therapy.

JM: The way to enter the healing channels is, if you will from my perspective, by way of heart energy.

BJB: Yes.

JM: How do you do it? So I was thinking about that. How do you connect with some one at essences [the essence of both persons—therapist and client]? How do you fit in that kind of space? That is both something that you do internally and gets manifested in how you interact externally with the client. And I was struck by something that my mother [said]—I was just visiting her in the assisted living situation where they all moved in—well, all ten of them. It is a new place and they don’t have that many people there yet. But it is like, they have no shared history. And these are elderly people.

I started thinking about the use of the family map as a way—in a way it is a means to build a sense of knowing. And to compensate, if you will, for that lack of history you have with a client that walks in the door. Because when I know the story about Aunt Susie or Grandpa then I know something about that person that you don’t really usually know unless you have got a long shared history or an intimate shared history.

But to just hear the story seems like that is not enough either. And one of the things I think Virginia Satir did so well was that she knew how to sift out from narration and show the universals that had to do with life’s challenges and life’s longings.

BJB: That is a nice way of putting it.

JM: So that is where I think, particularly in this time of managed care because people—you know—everything is fast-paced. Too fast paced.

BJB: Well, everything is also sort of de-humanizing.

JM: That pace does seem to erode the humanness. I think we can, as therapists—if we are skilled, and if we are operating from that core that Virginia Satir was talking about—I think we can do a lot in a short period of time.

BJB: Yes.

JM: Because what we are talking about doing, that is, connecting to a person’s real essence as a way to open the channel of that person’s

healing—for people to have that experience so validating and so supportive: I think there is no limit to the power of that experience.

For me, what is sad is having [that experience without enough time to consolidate it]. The fact is people do get that experience with good therapists but they aren't often able to stay in therapy long enough to really understand how much they participate in the process and what skills they are using that are opening themselves. So it is harder for the process to have a kind of sustainability. Because in a sense the transformation and the support can feel so positive and rich. However, their job—all of our jobs—is to find in our lives, in our families, in our friendships and in our churches or in our whatever, places which open heart energy (especially maybe with ourselves, the therapists). And [to find] the skills; the ways to tap into that positive, nurturing, open, healing kind of energy that is based on, it seems to me, very simply, love. [It is the] experience of love energy moving in and between to [make things] safe. [To make it so that] that I can return to that experience. If I can return to that experience of being genuine—if you have not had much of that [experience] and then you get it with a therapist, it is very moving and very powerful. Then there is how do I learn how to do it without a therapist? That one has got me a little more befuddled.

BJB: In ten sessions.

JM: Right. And maybe it is just people who have got offtrack and need a little help to get back on track [who can move on quickly after the ten sessions] but for people who basically do not know very much, experientially, about getting support, receiving support, opening themselves to be seen, to really be heard, really be [validated]—[those people] have very little experience with this. If that is what really opens the healing channels, they then need help in practicing it.

### *CONNECTING VERSUS DISCONNECTING*

BJB: Do you think Virginia Satir could really help people do that [opening of the healing channels] quicker than the rest of us? Or do you think anybody has to have [a given] amount of practice to be able to keep the channels appropriately open?

JM: I definitely think the amount of practice needed in the change process depends on the person. At least during the time when I knew Virginia, a lot of her work was, you know, sort of one time experiences. And it would be a very powerful transformative experience, but

what the person was able to carry from that [experience] in terms of manifesting different behaviors, I don't know. And I mean I certainly know people who had very moving family reconstruction experiences and who, you know, continued to struggle years later with difficulties. I mean if you didn't know you would not *know* they'd had a reconstruction. It is not like the reconstruction cured them. And I am sure those people would take nothing for those experiences. So maybe it is a long time sometimes for what is cooking on the inside to really be a real delicacy on the outside. And, again, depending on the strengths of the person and I think really how much they know about getting and receiving support.

BJB: Hmmm

JM: Because everything, I have decided, is easier with support and it is amazing the number of people whose strategy for survival is—because of distrust—to isolate themselves—to withdraw. Or to blame. And so those behaviors do not make it very easy for them to get support.

Anyway, back to the idea of how do we enter that [space] and help open that channel. Not that we could not do it with some clients without a word being spoken. I am sure there are some people who could come in and we could just sit with them. Maybe hold their hand. Look in their eyes and just sit reverently. But, for the most part, people do need to talk about their lives as a way to connect.

And Virginia knew how to take a little bit of story and know how that story could sit in a larger context of people's interpersonal process patterns (what I call them). So no matter the story—if you are doing a family map or if you are listening to what it is a family wants to have happen—she picked up very fast on the universal challenges and longings. She also picked up how the system seemed to manage interpersonally—themselves—in the process of that event. So you would get back to the problem is not the problem; it is the coping. She was listening with about three ears. One, enough of the context to get the universal issue and then also hearing enough to get how the system was operating interpersonally. And that last one—how the system operates in terms of its interpersonal process—seems essential just in terms of what we are just talking about.

If we are going to be in a healing place, in a sense, we can not do it all by ourselves. I mean we are social beings, me/you. So the connection we were talking about with the client and the therapist—those connections—or lack of connections—in the family system are central to

how well, in effect, the client can take the family and move it into “real time” [as opposed to “practice time,” in the presence of the therapist] with significant family members and friends. So if the system is highly adept at disconnecting and very incompetent at connecting, your client has got their work cut out for them because they cannot do it alone.

BJB: Would you say the incompetence is, generally speaking, lack of familiarity and practice? Or not?

JM: Well, I think there is a lack of familiarity with it. It is not the norm to connect around things—it is the norm to stay distant and protected in that way. Of course, it doesn’t protect you from life to stay disconnected but a lot of people surely have become experts at living from a distance.

BJB: Umhm

#### ***VIRGINIA SATIR WORKED WITH THE PERSON OF THE THERAPIST***

JM: And it is very difficult to access that healing energy when our hearts are living at a distance to these people who are most important to us.

BJB: That’s well put. That is true. I am trying to think how this applies to the therapist, too.

JM: In terms of our healing or in terms of our helping access the healing with the client?

BJB: I was thinking more in terms of our own dynamics—coming from the same general population and being vulnerable to the same disconnected norm.

JM: Yes, yes, well, I think that is why Virginia’s training programs were so effective. Because she worked with the person of the therapist.

BJB: Yes.

JM: She taught us how to connect. She taught us about how important it was and then she taught us how to do it. And, of course, it wasn’t short term training. If you think about it, like, for some of us, it was long term training. But for people who maybe went only to one month long [workshop], or even if they went to a three day workshop, there was the opportunity to, [one], see her connecting and, [two], be an observer to that [connecting] process and learn from it. Also the skills—[to observe and learn] the communication skills.

BJB: From what it looked like to me, it seemed me like a person almost had to spend a whole month [in training with Virginia] to know what she was really talking about. Now that is coming from my first exposure having taken place in my extreme youth. If I had seen her when I had some sense, later on, it might have all leapt into place quicker.

JM: Well, what happened for me the first time I was in a workshop with her, I did manage to be the mother and wife in the simulated family so it was “up close and personal.” But what I was struck with was everything she said I knew was true, but no one had ever said it. It had not been said. So I think if I had had no more experience with [the Satir Model], I would have been given some truths that I could not deny and that were very validating of my life. And of my feelings—the value, if you will, of my emotions. And I don’t know what more I could have done with just that one experience, but I did know it was true. I think people see it. I said, “Oh, yeah, yeah. Yeah. Right on.” Then people go into their offices and then say, but, ok, so now what do I do?” So maybe what is missing is, again, the opportunity to practice and to experience. I have no idea how people learn therapy without having the kind of indepth experience that we had.

The value to me—besides—well, one of the primary values was that I was in one reconstruction after another, after another, after another and another. Therefore, I went to the insides—to the inner system—of so many families—to that intimate core. And from all different angles, as mother, as grandmother, as daughter, as aunt, as sister—and I think that is what helped me learn about—a term which I call “the universality of emotionality.” [Role-playing in many family reconstructions] really is a way to learn about what it really means to be a human being. It does not matter the story; it does not matter the culture at the deepest level if you can go through the veils and the fears and the defenses that get constructed in culturally specific kinds of ways. If you just get to the heart of the person or of the family you get it validated time and time again about what Virginia used to say: we all just want to be loved.

#### **WHAT IS “HEART ENERGY”-WHAT IS LOVE?**

BJB: Yeah, and that is so simple. People think it can’t be true because it is too simple.

JM: Right. I will tell you an interesting story about how simple that

is and how hard it is to get. I don't know if when you were with Virginia if she was using the Self Esteem Maintenance Tool Kit?

BJB: Not yet. If she was, she was not calling it that—she might have been using it.

JM: Well, in [the kit] is the courage stick, the wisdom box, the detective hat, the yes/no medallion, the golden key, and the wishing wand. Each of those represented what she believed to be the God-given, if you will, resources that every human has and they are like tools for maintaining our self esteem. Well, I added the heart. Now for years, I knew it was missing and I didn't know about this until Virginia died because, to be honest with you, before she died, as far as I was concerned, the self esteem kit was another—I don't even know what the word is—but kind of a soft, not necessarily well-thought-out, a little too fluffy, too cute or something.

So anyway, it was only after she died that I got into the Self Esteem Tool Kit and created it, got the icons like the literal golden key, a literal courage stick—like visual aids—and then I realized that the heart was missing. And I figured it was an oversight because she certainly knew about it and tried to teach us about it. The interesting thing was this trainee of mine was going to do some stationery [out of which to form a logo]—and, when you are teaching, you can throw a lot of words and people will kind of get the sense of it. She wanted *one* word. And I had said well, the heart is our capacity to be compassionate. And she said aren't you talking about feelings? I said well, yes.

Anyway I never did land on what exactly and succinctly the heart was representing for the self esteem maintenance kit until this summer. And it is, *of course*, the ability to love, period. I can't tell you how long I kind of thought, "Well, exactly what is it?" I mean I know she doesn't have it in the kit. It is not the wisdom; it is something different from the wisdom she used to talk about. How can you really be congruent if you can not love yourself? If you can't from—in the heart—be in a loving and receptive place to the person you are in dialogue with? The easiest thing to have congruence stop, that is, [to stop] the flow, is [to stop] the love energy—the heart to close and distance to be created and blaming to start. I don't know where all this is except to say that yes, I think it is very simple, but it is hard. I'm not dumb. I'm not the brightest person in the world by a long shot, but is like after using this for years, I said, "Oh." Simple.

BJB: When I said "simple," I did not mean easy.



JM: Right. Yes.

BJB: I think Virginia was full of simple stuff that was so simple that people could not understand it.

JM: Well, I think at the level that many of us have stayed with her system I think that is true. She made it look simple. She made it sound simple. She made it look easy. But—and it is a hard one for me now, too, to forget because it is so natural: it is hard to know how much people don't know, when what we know seems so basic.

BJB: Yes. I get caught up short every so often with that.

JM: I do, too. I forget. I get caught up short similarly living in Chapel Hill even though it is in the South. I go to places and I hear—whether it is racial prejudice or whether it is homophobia, or, just on and on. I forget how frightened people are out there in the world.

BJB: Yes.

JM: And that is another thing that closes the heart down.

BJB: Quick.

JM: You bet. You bet. So interestingly enough about the heart, you remember the article I wrote for your journal about the seven “A’s” (McLendon, 1996).

BJB: Yes.

JM: I think, at that time, it was six. They kept growing. I have come to the last one and there are seven. The last one is altruism. I don't know if you remember the first one was basically about within the person: awareness, acceptance, and authorship. That is kind of all inside the person. Then you move to the between, which is articulation, and then application in your intimate, close-in relationships. And from there you go to activism, which is carrying the learning from your awareness into culture beyond your own. And there from activism is altruism. Now I have been saying altruism as the seventh for two years and everytime I say it, I say, similarly, it is kind of hard. I believe this is true and that it is different from activism and that it is important for us to know about. To be honest with you, I don't know what I need to know about it to be able to teach about it.

BJB: Every so often, I try to figure out how to define “love” and I have not come up with it yet and maybe altruism is in the same little circle.

JM: Yes. This summer, [I finally came up with something] after spending a week in a monastery and just having time and in a community that was intent on prayer and opening the heart—for me to be still

enough and just quiet enough to see what would lift up out of me. That is when I came up with that: altruism is acting from the heart. The motivation is in the heart. I can tell you there is plenty I do that looks like, "Isn't she generous, isn't she blah, blah, blah" that is more about activism and/or applying but not exactly coming from my heart. Not that I don't have my heart participating, but I think altruism is so clearly heart motivated.

BJB: Yes. That is good. I think about that a lot.

JM: Well, maybe that is another [journal] issue: What is love?

BJB: I think it is a pretty good issue, myself and I think it is connected [to the issue at hand] because you started out by talking about loving energy being the—how did you put it?—What is the connecting force? Or the connecting energy?

JM: The loving energy, I think, is the energy that opens the channel to the healing energy and, again, it is like how do we, as therapists, create inside of ourselves, that living healing energy? That is energy of being centered and being balanced and being present and being mindful, and being prayerful, all those. How do we learn to create that in ourselves so we can extend *that* and use *that* as the milieu for our therapy intervention? Whether it is again going back to the family map and getting narratives and connecting those to the universal issues of being humans, to how those issues are represented in the events that are being talked about and then how the interpersonal patterns are holding those events. It is like all of that must happen while the therapist is in a balanced, giving [mode] that is opening, that is heart energy, I think.

And receiving the client. Receiving what? Receiving the self, I guess, of the client.

BJB: You are helping me with a real difficult one I have to see later today.

JM: I have to do one right after us that is real difficult. This will be the third time I have seen her and I feel like she presents with such an incredible mask.

BJB: Mmm

JM: I, I don't know. It is going to be interesting to see when or if I really feel like she relaxes. Which is a part of being in the healing energy, is to let the body—going back to Virginia—the connection with the body is letting the body relax.

BJB: Yes, that is part of the openness.

JM: I don't know whether it has value for whatever might be able to be put into words for this issue you are dealing with, but, in terms of trying again to elicit from the client's story, a handle of her or their or his challenge for being human. [Pause . . . ] I could talk about the "P's."

### THE SIX "P'S"<sup>1</sup> (MCLENDON, 1998)

I think I talked about that at the Avanta meeting—the "P's." I think you were there, I don't know. I have got them down. It is like there are areas which I am interested in pursuing or keeping my antenna awake for. It is, again, looking for whatever the interpersonal process patterns are, for how the system deals with, number one, pain.

I think about my mother yesterday crying—a woman who does not cry. Who had two blind children in the family she grew up in. All the pressures in the family—two kids that are blind and having to make do in the time of Depression, being a farming family, you just sucked up anything that. . . .

BJB: Oh, yes.

JM: So how did she learn how to deal with pain? As I talk with her, it is like she sucked it up and, course, I think her body paid. So, for her, just being able to cry was like a huge thing for her. So how people deal with pain. Like in that family, you really were not supposed to have it. Relatives dying. Physical pain. Interpersonal pain. Feelings hurt. Ta da ta da ta da. I mean, you could just go on and on. This life has not been created so that any of us could be without pain.

BJB: Certainly hasn't.

JM: And so, again, are patterns—the interpersonal patterns—that have to do with pain—do they help people connect—which would be creating that healing milieu? Or do they support people *disconnecting*? And, too often, pain is a precipitant for disconnecting.

BJB: That's the truth. Those who grew up in households where they were not going to get a comfortable response.

JM: Yep. You learn. You learn to suck it up and it comes out somewhere. It is going to get expressed somewhere in the body, somatically, or in the ways that you communicate. Both.

BJB: Right.

JM: So those "P's." The first one, I think, is very important. What do you find out and how can you help people connect with their pain

rather than disconnect? And then, next, which I think is almost equally a challenge for people and that is how they deal with pleasure.

BJB: Oh, yes.

JM: I can't tell you how many couples I work with—young couples—where I think the primary focus is about giving them permission and help in learning how to create pleasure in their life.

BJB: Yes.

JM: I mean, again, it is not real easy. Pleasure can be just as disconnecting as pain and that is the jealousies that come up in families: somebody had a wonderful time, the other one didn't. Or the issues around how much it cost. And, if you came from a kind of work-oriented family like I did—*pleasure* is not thought too well of. If you got pleasure from your work, that was good. But there is something about learning how to be pleased. Learning how and whether it is [o.k.]—I remember one of my supervisors in my social work training said, "You know, you just don't really appreciate the pleasure of eating." She was really a wonderful supervisor and my ex-husband—I wasn't married to him at this time—anyway, he was, at the time, in Hawaii. I met him and she and he and I would spend a lot of time together and often times it was around food. And it is true. I did not know the pleasure of eating. It was something you did. Kind of like brushing your teeth, you know?

BJB: Well, that kind of goes with that work-oriented thing.

JM: Right.

BJB: You just get this over with quick so you can get back to what you were doing.

JM: Right. Right. So I have since learned the pleasure of eating. It is like the sensual experience of being alive. What a loss when we are not supported to be resonate with that. What a loss.

So there were other "P's" from how the system deals with problems—how it deals with plans, can you count on your family to make plans and carry them out? Or are the plans realistic? Are they forever making plans that they can not execute? Maybe we are getting too far afield from "personhood."

BJB: From personhood, which is the overarching "P."

JM: From personhood. Right.

I guess that is the question: what are the interpersonal processes that enliven the personhood of your client?

BJB: Yes.

JM: And, if you will, we know to be true to enliven *our* personhood—so the client has got a person to relate to.

**WHAT ARE THE LONGINGS?  
WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?**

BJB: Thinking of one I have got to see this afternoon. Last week was *so* attacking and I am trying to think, “What is the thing in here?”

JM: What gets in the way or what does she throw up to keep you and herself isolated?

BJB: My personhood door tends to slam shut after much of an attack. I am not good at it.

JM: What is she attacking you about?

BJB: Oh, I don’t know—I’m her mother.

JM: Uh huh. Were you the good mother to begin with?

BJB: Sometimes. The day before I had been.

JM: Well, I think that is a good question. How do we keep our hearts open while our clients are flailing around in their blaming, agitated, condescending, and sometimes, intimidating ways?

BJB: Right. How do you do that?

JM: I think, at one level, I would say it is kind of like an aikido process: I am not absorbing. I am letting that move on off. Like I am diverting. I am diverting the blame energy. And I try to keep open and interested to hear about the person’s pain—which I know is theirs and was theirs before they ever met me. So, in a sense, this attack on me—it could be looked at—it is just like a narrative that is happening on somebody’s family map.

So what is the issue here for this person? What is the longing? What is the challenge? Try to stay focused on her. Keep being in touch with my breathing. That is one of the ways. Thank God for Virginia’s teaching me about that one. Because, literally, if I bring my awareness back to my breathing and just try to keep my breathing open and easy, I can take in more. But I don’t—I am really looking for a way to not get distracted or disconnected from the person. Because that is what they are skilled at. It is in their time of pain or, in their time of this-didn’t-work-right or that-didn’t-work-right, that they learned that the connection could not be sustained.

This woman sounds very difficult. She travels emotionally over

vast territories. So just keeping up with where she is really coming from, I would think, would be hard.

BJB: That is probably the key problem.

JM: What do you mean?

BJB: I had no *idea* she was going to come in that day in that frame. I was just absolutely caught off guard with it. But she does it frequently. Or often enough that it is not something that does not happen.

JM: So today she might come in and be in a much more collaborative mode?

BJB: Quite possible. Even be apologetic. Or she might not keep the appointment. She swore she wasn't coming. Either one just as likely.

JM: Well, how do *you* do it?

BJB: How do I do it? *When* I do it—I sometimes do not manage to do it—but, *when* I do it, it is by being able to see the desperate child.

JM: Um hmm.

BJB: Somehow or another that does not necessarily work even if I do.

JM: Right. But I think that is a huge one, for me, too. To know and sense that little girl or that little boy. I think the trick, for me—Carol and I were having a conversation last night—she is reading an interesting book called, *In Session*, on transformation. New book, really sounds good. Was it Schiff (1975) who used to take the people in and re-parent them? [Carol] says, “Jean, you do this inner child thing and then sometimes you have these little stuffed critters for these people. I do not understand why you do that.” I was saying, “Well, I am wanting people to—I use it as a “visual aid,” a kinesthetic aid, an auditory-sensory aid—to help people acknowledge that they have got this little girl or little boy that still lives inside them.

I think the way I am able to work with people as disturbed as they are and still take long periods of time off and not have—not be harassed at home by telephone calls and all—I do not become the parent to that little child, I am constantly working for them to accept that they now have to learn to parent that little child. And so I am wanting—I am in a sense almost using the adult as my co-therapist to help that little one—to help the little one inside.

So I don't know whether this woman you are talking about—perhaps she keeps trying to put the little one in *your* lap.

BJB: She has got this dynamic that goes on that she gets *mad* at the thought that she has got to be the one who does this.

JM: Well, I can't blame her! That is bad enough—why you have to do it . . . because, too, if you found your loved one—if you found the one you really loved—then *they* were going to do it. If your parents didn't do it, then you get the second chance. Your lover is going to do it.

Well [the heck with] that one too. That little Jean, she keeps coming back to me. I am stuck with her. As I have come to appreciate this, she does not want anybody else really. She wants *my* acceptance. She wants me to really value her experience, her feelings, her needs. And there is no other part of me that turns me into my basic needs faster, than to think about little Jean. She is the wisest one about our emotional needs. Maybe our spiritual needs, too.

BJB: Um hmm.

JM: So that is a part about tapping into the personhood—our own as well as our client's. Is really appreciating the—I do not want to say the “little girl” or the “little boy inside”—but that is what it is. That is the best metaphor I know to help people appreciate their vulnerabilities, their real human-ness. Adults, we have learned to be so machine-like.

BJB: I know.

JM: Anyway, you must have done your job mighty good because I have just been rattling. I have enjoyed talking and having time with you, appreciating your being willing to get this on tape.

#### NOTE

1. Pain, pleasure, plans, problems, performance, and power.

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