

BREATHING INTO CONTACT

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This essay is about attending to breathing in the practice of Gestalt therapy. Breathing, the ephemeral experience in which we're engaged every moment of our lives, the biological process that is our central self support. What is the quality of the field that is perceptible when people attend to breathing? It is sometimes experienced as an expansion, a feeling of self exhaling into contact with environment and of environment meeting self as air enters the body. This somatic experience of contact boundary is fuller than can be conveyed in language; it is an aware experience of id functioning.

Breathing work is a study, an ongoing experiential inquiry into the details of one's moment-to-moment existence. A way of knowing how we are in the world right now, and of perceiving patterns in our way of being overtime. Through becoming aware of our breathing, we can feel our somatic supports and lacks thereof. Through attending with curiosity to these details of our physiologic functioning, our sense of self changes. To aggress into the environment and encounter the novel, we require support. Breathing is the essential life process which provides that support.

We are all breathing right now, as differently as we are individuals, as similarly as our biologic nature makes possible. In *Gestalt Therapy*, Paul Goodman wrote, "The first step in therapy is contacting the breathing." Bringing this background function forward can promote energetic work in Gestalt therapy. My aim in this paper is both to illustrate and to provide an experience of how that may occur. I also want to discuss the historical connection between an early breathwork modality and the beginnings of Gestalt therapy.

EXPERIMENT

We are each breathing right now, and possibly a litde differendy from the way we were a few minutes ago, because breathing often changes as we notice it. Breathing self-regulates in response to the activities we are doing or thinking about doing, since cells require different amounts of oxygen for different activities.

Being aware of spontaneous changes in our breathing patterns which occur according to need affords us palpable experience of organismic self-regulation. "In excitement there is always an upsurge in the metabolic process ... and hence an imperious need for more air! The healthy organism responds in simple fashion by increasing the rate and amplitude of breathing ...," writes Fritz Perls in Gestalt Therapy.

Each of us breathes with a greater or lesser degree of efficient adjustment to present circumstance, in part depending on whether and in what ways we interrupt our spontaneous breathing patterns. Sometimes we may interrupt awarely with regard to present need. For example, when I broke a rib, I purposely breathed shallowly for a time so as to avoid pain. On the other hand, we may be unaware of interrupting as when, in becoming frightened, we gasp and hold our breath. Thereafter, having not fully processed the experience, we continue to resume breathing until the habitual interruption feels "natural" and the original cause of our gasping is forgotten. From *Gestalt Therapy*: "There is nothing pathologic in the momentary arrest of respiration which occurs when a strong stimulus abruptly presents itself. . . What is pathologic is to extend this emergency behavior indefinitely."

Interrupted breathing occurs either through muscles overtensing or through their diminishing in tonicity. Primary muscles of breathing are the diaphragm and the intercostals. Secondarily, many structural muscles of the torso are involved. Although the diaphragm will not stop moving while we are alive, the extent of its excursion can vary greatly depending upon our state of being. Perhaps right now some of us may be interrupting our breathing in one way or another. How we interrupt our cycles of inhalation and exhalation may be very subtle or may be quite obvious. Can you notice right now where in your body you feel movement associated with breathing? And what do you feel surrounding that area of movement? Do your sensations change as you notice them? What adjectives would you use to describe the quality of your breathing right now? Is it the same as a moment ago or is something slightly different? There are no right and wrong answers to this. You are describing your experience. At this moment, is it difficult or easy to attend to your breathing? Annoying or welcome, or both? If your breathing is a little different, do you notice any other changes in your vision, for example, or your temperature, your mood, your awareness of the environment, or of yourself?

If your awareness of yourself has changed, what would you say about how contactful you are right now? What if you were to start a session with a client? Do you think the quality of contact would be different right now from having started without noticing your breathing? I ask this question in the spirit of experiment, without presupposing a particular answer.

Breathing Awareness in Laura Perls Work

In *Living at the Boundary* there is a transcript of Laura Perls giving a workshop. In its sixty-one pages, twenty-seven contain moments in which working with body awareness is foreground, ten of these specifically refer to breathing, and four draw attention to voice (phonated breath). This is not a 'Gestalt and Bodywork' approach. As Laura says, "It's not use of the body ... the point is to be a body." (Emphasis added.) Laura's style is an integrated way of working where participants are encouraged to attend to their body experiences as part of a dialogic interchange to, as she put it, be "somebody."

In one exchange, Laura explains that in working this way, she "observe(s) and deal(s) with small things or what is usually taken for granted, what is called obvious, because it is in the obvious that resistances and difficulties are embedded." She is teaching the workshop members about noticing and working with the fine details of experience.

Laura said that "Resistance was assistance," reminding us that interruptions in contact have practical, preservative origins which may have outlasted their usefulness. These resistances include interruptions in breathing patterns. She did not suggest that clients in her workshop "improve" their breathing, but rather be aware of it. She said, ". . . any strong manipulation I would reject, because it tends to break through, to hit through a resistance without seeing that there is sufficient support when it's done." Rather than attempting to prematurely dissolve the somatic interruptions she helped clients become aware in more detail of how they were interrupting and what meaning that had for them. She talks about how support must be present for contact to take place, and says that she developed her bright sensing of her own body processes through pursuing ". . . choral dance and eurythmic work in other German systems."

Laura Perls and Elsa Gindler

I was interested in knowing how Laura Perls had come to attend to somatic awareness as an important aspect of her practice of Gestalt therapy. I had not had the opportunity to experience Laura's work in person; yet in reading the transcript of her workshop, her style had a familiar resonance for me, though the familiarity was not from the field of psychotherapy.

I heard in many of her expressions phrases similar to those used by Carola Speads, a breathwork specialist who had been Elsa Gindler's teaching assistant in Berlin from the early 1920s until 1938.

Early in the twentieth century, Elsa Gindler developed a way of working with people (*Arbeit am Menschen*) in which she encouraged them to move awarely and to notice their breathing and other body experiences while moving. "We are not teaching movement," she said, "we are teaching concentration," her word for awareness or paying attention. (Here we may recall that Fritz and Laura first thought of calling Gestalt therapy "Concentration therapy.") The movements Gindler taught were not rote or repetitive. Each student did them in her or his own way. She encouraged students to be curious about what might occur - in exactly those words.

Gindler called the movements "experiments." She noticed that the whole person was affected by these experiments, not just physical functioning, but thinking, mood and outlook as well. In 1926 she wrote, "I have tried to show to what a great extent constriction is bound up with disturbances in breathing, and these, once again, with disturbances in the psychic realm."

In *Living at the Boundary*, Laura states, ". . . in my practice [in South Africa in the 1940s] I started to use face-to-face dialogue and body awareness. . . ." I was struck by the similarities between Laura's and Gindler's work, and wondered about it. Then, in 1993, The *Gestalt Journal* published Fritz Perls' "Life Chronology." It contained the following entry: "1930 — Wife Laura involved in expressive movement Gindler." There I found the connection, later corroborated in a footnote written by Laura in the 1979 volume of the *Gestalt Journal*.

My experience of Gindler's work is through Carola Speads' teaching. I

studied and pursued training with Carola from 1963 to 1995. Carola often spoke of what she had done in classes with Gindler, or when teaching as Gindler's assistant. In a published interview, Carola described attending a workshop given by Gindler in 1955, after they had not seen each other for 17 years: "I got there, and it was as if I had never left... in the way both she and I taught. After all those years, I found that she used the same comparisons and examples that I had come to use in my work in New York. It was amazing. There was no distance between us, no time lost whatsoever."

Here is a list of some expressions Carola used in class in New York when teaching the Gindler approach; she called her work "Physical Reeducation."

- What are you aware of right now?
- Be curious about the details of what you are feeling.
- Be interested not only in what you do, but in how you are doing it.
- Let change occur on its own.
- Simply notice what is.
- How are you doing that right now? (in response to a student reporting muscle cramping.)
- It's an experiment; be open-minded.
- Accept what is available.
- No expectations.

Here are some expressions of Laura's from *Living at the Boundary*.

- No expectations.
- Are you breathing right now?
- Awareness of what is.
- What are you in touch with now?

— Take it as it comes; start with that

— You experience yourself as a body ... When you don't have that, you easily experience yourself as nobody.

— Paying attention.

— I work with the obvious.

— We can experiment... (In fact, the spine experiment she suggests to a participant at the workshop is the same one I did in Carola's class several times over many years.)

Knowing that Laura was a student of Gindler, and in comparing these two lists of expressions, I infer that Elsa Gindler's approach to working with people had a strong effect on Laura Perls' way of doing therapy as well as on her contributions to the discourse which lead to the writing of Gestalt therapy theory by Perls, Hefferline and Goodman in *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*.

Fritz Perls' Experience of Gindler's Work

Fritz Perls, too, was aware of the efficacy of Gindler's breath and body work. In 1946 or 1947, shortly after arriving in New York, Fritz addressed the William Alanson White Institute in a talk entitled "Planned Psychotherapy." Toward the end of his speech, he said, "I recommend as necessary complimentary aspects of the study of the human personality at least three subjects: Gestalt psychology, semantics, and last but not least the approach to the Gindler School." (Emphasis added)

At that time, Fritz was taking lessons with Charlotte Selver, who had studied with Gindler and Heinrich Jacoby in Berlin. In Jack Gaines' book, *Fritz Perls: Here and Now*, Selver is quoted, "He started to take private lessons with me ... he asked me to work with him. He wanted me to take his patients before him and kind of open them up for what he wanted to work on with them later ... a collaboration ... I did not want to work his way."

Additionally, both Anni and Elsa Lundberg Reich, wives of Fritz's

analyst Wilhelm Reich, studied Gindler's work with Clare Nathansohn Fenichel, wife of Otto Fenichel. David Boadella states that Elsa Reich's involvement with Gindler bodywork greatly influenced Reich's ideas and way of working. This is another thread, outside the scope of this paper; yet I am interested to consider the possibility that Gindler's work had far-reaching effects on the practice of psychotherapy than has yet been brought to light.

Working with Clients' Awareness of Breathing

In practicing Gestalt therapy, I frequently encourage clients to attend to their somatic experiences, including breathing. This may be a passing reference to in-the-moment breathing sensations, or attention to breathing experiences as a regular aspect of our working, or it might be an ongoing course of breathing experiments which weave the main fabric of our work. Here are some examples. I have changed the names and identifying details to protect confidentiality.

1) Reva is a mature woman who is self-employed. In the beginning of our work, she arrived at each session in a state of anxiety, trying to express many thoughts and feelings at once, wrapping her arms around her torso, and squeezing her throat so that her speech tone was high and edgy. At first she was too anxious to allow a figure to form, but jumped from topic to topic, expressing worry that she would leave something out. I thought about the statement in Gestalt Therapy that "Anxiety is the experience of breathing difficulty during any blocked excitement."

She would arrive, race into the room without looking around, start talking and barely pause to breathe. There was little fore-contact. After a few sessions, she apologized for "spilling everything" on me. I asked her how she felt doing that. "Relieved, but guilty," she replied. We talked about it for a while. Then I asked her if she'd like to experiment with "spilling." She was interested. We worked with her "spilling out" her breath between phrases. Then she began to feel her need to replenish; so she took more time to allow air to come in again. She reported being afraid to take in the air she needed. This led to ongoing work around her sensing and seeking ways to satisfy felt needs and her fear of doing so. Seeking ways to satisfy her needs led to brighter contact with her environment. As she supported her speech with aware breathing, our conversation slowed, her voice tone changed; she spoke with connection and affect about her

experiences. In time, her general anxiety diminished.

2) Margaret works in the performing arts. She felt free and expressive on stage while being acutely embarrassed and tongue-tied in her social life. She suffered with loneliness. At gatherings and parties she felt she wanted to sink into the floor and disappear. She reported holding her breath in the hope of not being noticed. We experimented with breath holding. Through these experiments, Margaret discovered her strong desire to take a breath, to be alive. This awareness of another aspect of herself changed her view of how she could reach out for more in life.

We extended breathing experiments into her work and social activities. She went to a social hour at her job and at first experimented with simply being able to stay in the room by remaining aware of herself breathing. We then extended the experiment to conversing in the social hour while occasionally checking in to feel herself breathing. At each stage of greater contact with people around her, she succeeded in supporting herself through aware breathing awareness. Much material for therapy emerged through experimenting with new experience. We worked slowly. Margaret began attending parties, going on dates, and eventually entered an intimate relationship. She recently breathed her way through a holiday dinner with her fiancé's family. In addition to providing actual physiological support, breathing has become her metaphor for being herself.

3) Natalie works as a model. As a child, she was left to be raised by relatives while her mother emigrated to the United States. The beloved aunt who was raising her died; and her subsequent experiences growing up were frightening. She was profoundly depressed and was reflecting immense amounts of anger. While she wanted therapy, she didn't want to speak. In fact, it emerged that she had stopped speaking for several years when her mother had gone away. She had spoken in school, but had remained mute at home. Now she worked in a profession where she did not need to speak.

I suggested to her that instead of speaking we do breath work. For communication, we experimented with her looking at me or away from me. Later she created a series of gestures to tell me what she was experiencing in the breathing work. In the fourth month of this

work, Natalie began to speak about an arising memory of her homeland. From then on, therapy sessions consisted of breath work, conversation, and various facilitated activities for undoing retroflexing, including sound making, dance story telling, quasi-martial arts activities, drawing, and journal writing.

After two years, Natalie enrolled in college to become a teacher, a profession she had always dreamed of following. We are now working on her being able to support herself wide breathing in speaking up in class. Natalie's self-supports are fragile. She frequently feels sad and angry. We continue to work.

4) With some clients, I do not directly work with breathing. Usually, these are persons who show symptoms of having suffered severe trauma and are at the beginning of their therapy. I find that, for these persons, the awakening of somatic sensation without sufficient ground having been established in the therapeutic relationship to hold the emerging experiences causes panic and often dissociation. At a later stage of therapy, aware breathing work can be valuable, and needs to be introduced in tiny experimental increments. In his book *Healing Tasks*, James E. Kepner states, "Body-oriented therapy's application to survivors [of abuse] requires particular delicacy and care."

Therapists' Self Support through Aware Breathing

We therapists can support ourselves throughout our work day by attending to our own breathing from time to time. Between sessions, I think of this as withdrawal from contact with the preceding client into awareness of my own id functioning, from which ground I will be ready to participate in new emerging figures with the next client. I usually quietly notice my breathing for four or five minutes, sometimes employing experiments illustrated in Carola Sped's book. *Ways to Better Breathing*.

When the doorbell rings, I try to remain aware of how I am moving and breathing as I answer the door. When I fail to do this, I find that I am holding my breath when greeting an arriving client. If I'm holding my breath, I am not fully supported in our first moments of contact. When we sit down to work, I take time to feel the supports of the chair, of the floor beneath my feet and of my breathing. I observe my client's sitting and breathing as well. This helps me be somatically

present with my client and able to perceive his/her somatic state. It's through this somatic attunement that I am able to empathize with my client, to feel the field we create together.

When a client brings forward intense and difficult emotions in session, I find that becoming aware of my breathing helps me be fully present in safely supporting his/her strong expressions of affect and need. I am able to see and hear the client while retaining a clear sense of myself, thus being available to empathize while avoiding becoming confluent with the client's projections.

Conclusion

The importance of attending to breathing in Gestalt therapy is articulated in our theory in both Parts One and Two of Gestalt Therapy. It is modeled in the practice of Laura Perls who taught scores of practitioners to work with breath and body awareness as an integral part of Gestalt therapy. Laura's and Fritz's experiences with Elsa Gindler's whole person approach to bodywork informed Gestalt therapy from its theoretical and practical beginnings. Attending to breathing in a therapy session can amplify moment-to-moment awareness of process, can support both therapist and client in encountering what is new, can brighten contacting between client and therapist and thus expand the field they co-create. In this connection, I find inspiration in the words of poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "He lives most life whoever breathes most air."

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