

A Gestaltist Visits NPAP

Free Associations

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My colleague Frank Bosco and I were pleased to attend Charlotte Schwartz's presentation on "The Artistry of Language" with discussant Martin Schulman. The subject interested us because of the emphasis placed upon language at our institute, The New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy (NYIGT). At the reception following Charlotte's presentation, we conversed with Aleksandra Wagner and revealed to her—with a mixture of glee and shyness—that we were Gestalt therapists who, drawn by the evening's topic, were visiting NPAP.

Aleksandra invited us to write an article on Gestalt therapy for *Free Associations*. Glad to have the opportunity, while also a bit anxious that I be able to limn our modalities' differences clearly and respectfully, I take up the invitation. I will use Charlotte's lively topic, the artistry of language, as the thread running through this overview.

NYIGT was founded in 1952 by Drs. Fritz and Laura Perls. Our foundational text, *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*, was written in 1951 by Fritz Perls, Ralph Hefferline and Paul Goodman, in conversation with Laura Perls. The book consists of two volumes, one a setting out of our theory and the other a series of experiments which the reader may undertake in order to bring his/her phenomenological experience - in its fullness of thought, emotion, and physical process - into awareness.

Goodman wrote Volume Two, based on conversations with Fritz and Laura. Chapter VII is entitled "Verbalizing and Poetry". In it Goodman writes, "Among the evolutionary developments of mankind, speech is of special importance...As with other developments, the neurotic abuse consists of using a form of speech that is 'instead of' rather than 'along with'...This is isolation of the verbal personality", one whose "speech is insensitive, prosy, affectless, monotonous, stereotyped in content, inflexible in rhetorical attitude, mechanical in syntax, meaningless." Goodman is talking about the oral/aural language that we as therapists and clients experience in session - the fully embodied experience of language.

In that chapter, too, Goodman writes a critique of free-association as a technique of therapy. Here we find one of the sharp contrasts between Gestalt therapy and psychoanalysis. As Goodman puts it, "The goal of psychotherapy is not for the therapist to become aware of something about the patient, but for the patient to become aware of himself." With regard to free association, he adds, "[The patient] must of course be made a partner in the interpreting." I am under the impression that that is in fact the way modern psychoanalysis works today; and I should think this would be a rich area for discussion between our two institutes.

The New York Institute recently celebrated its 50th anniversary with a conference and presentation of papers. In his paper "Gestalt Therapy as Carrying Forward Psychoanalysis-Radical", Philip Lichtenberg discussed Gestalt therapy's roots. He noted that both "Fritz and Laura were originally psychoanalysts and practiced for many years in that mode before founding Gestalt therapy." In his book "Psychoanalysis: Radical and Conservative" Lichtenberg points to two distinct historical branches of psychoanalysis; and it is from the radical branch (Freud's discussion of 'the experience of satisfaction' in Project for a Scientific Psychology; Fenichel, Helene Deutsch, Bettelheim, Ferenczi, Rank, and many others bringing into treatment awareness of the social, political and cultural environment) that he sees Gestalt therapy emerging, first in the groundbreaking Ego, Hunger and Aggression by Fritz, with several uncredited chapters written by Laura, and then in the aforementioned Gestalt Therapy.

One hallmark of our work as gestaltists is our attention to the quality of contacting in the room, here and now, between client and therapist, in the co-created space which is the field for that moment. One aspect of field is the language each of us uses as we work, the discourse we create together. We are aware of our own and our client's narrative threads, word choices, syntax, rise and fall of tone, vocal timbre, length of phrases, and patterns of breathing. All of these typify our attention to the whole person, whose physical experience of the moment is as important for us as her/his thoughts and emotions. Uttering and hearing words are physical acts.

The way we look at it, physical processes ground thoughts and emotions in the moment, making it possible to work with them rather than only to talk about them. The way we may include awareness of physical process in Gestalt therapy varies from therapist to therapist and may be as quiet as noticing and tracking it or as active as facilitating experiments with breath, voice, sensing or movement in the session.

In Gestalt therapy we often use experiments as catalysts for change because they can be experienced here and now. The possible kinds of experiments are endless and, thinking just about language, could include the client's repeating a sentence in a louder/softer/faster/slower voice tone; saying something again while looking at/away from the therapist; exaggerating an expression to bring out its underlying feeling; pausing to breathe between phrases and feeling what goes on when one does so. The doing of these things is a jumping-off point; an important part of the work occurs in processing, that is in exploring what is being felt, thought, imagined in the doing. When we do experiments in session, there is a chance for new experience to occur and to be processed within the support of the therapist/client field. This may lead to what we call new creative adjustments.

In our theory, people creatively adjust to both the opportunities and constraints in the field. When we cannot do so fluidly, we call that 'interrupting contact'. It is these interruptions, often fixed and habitual, that we are curious about in our therapeutic work. With regard to spoken language, interruptions in contacting may be perceived as frequent repetitions, paucity of vocabulary, squeezed or under-audible vocal tone, rushed or hesitant speech, statements in which the voice rises like a question, to name but a few

examples. We may chose to work directly with these manifestations of interrupting, or we may choose to work in other ways, remaining aware of changes that occur in speech and language as the whole self changes.

We attend, as well, to our own speech and language use in relation to each particular client. And it is a hallmark of Gestalt therapy practice that we may choose to selectively share our experience of our voice or speech with the client, thereby inviting the client to become aware of her/his. Our coming forward in this way interrupts transference; and that is what we want to do. We want to bring experience into the here and now where it can be changed through action, because in projected fantasies it can be talked about but never changed, we believe. This is a dramatic difference between how Gestalt therapists and psychoanalysts work.

Another hallmark of Gestalt therapy as practiced at the New York Institute (where we have come to call our approach Foundational Gestalt Therapy) is use of the aesthetic criterion for diagnosis. Here again our theory diverges markedly from psychoanalysis. We eschew a medical model of 'health' and 'illness' because we believe people are more complex than those polarities can describe. Rather, we are alert to the quality of contacting in the moment and note whether the experience is bright, clear, harmonious, flowing, graceful and energetic or less so or the obverse. In his article "Tiger! Tiger! burning bright - Aesthetic Values as Clinical Values", recently published in *Creative License - The Art of Gestalt Therapy*, Dan Bloom writes, "Gestalt therapy attends to the forming of the figure rather than to the figure formed. Content is thus of secondary import. Rather, what is crucial is the elasticity of how content is found and made. So long as this fluidity is maintained, discovery is supported and encouraged. This is Gestalt therapy's evaluation." We attend to how our clients, and how we ourselves, creatively adjust with best possibility for the moment at hand, forming a figure (Gestalt) which, if in full awareness - our principal job as therapists - will inevitably lead to change and to awareness of the next felt needs and choices available in the field. Fully living those ongoing processes, as Philip Lichtenberg puts it, is to be "thoroughly alive".

I thank you for the opportunity to tell you something about Gestalt therapy. I welcome your responses and questions and look forward to seeing many of you at Stuart Feder's presentation on Gustav and Alma Mahler in January.

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