

SOME REFLECTIONS ON GESTALT THERAPY*

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I was originally going to talk on gestalt and psychoanalysis. But I've changed my mind. For the simple reason that when I look at the matter truthfully, that particular combination does not really work for me in dealing with groups. Perhaps for others but not for me.

It is quite another matter in my individual therapy. Here I call myself a gestalt-analyst and for me that combination feels good and works effectively. I tell my clients that in my observation the two most effective ways of self-exploration are on the one hand, the Perlsian approach of here and now awareness; and on the other hand, the Freudian method of free-association. I encourage them to know clearly which is which and to develop a feeling of fluidity in moving from one to the other. And with these two basic tools I go to work. I will commonly have the client sit in my swivel chair and experiment with facing me directly, at times facing partially away, and at other times facing totally away. And I ask him to be aware of the various meanings and sensations which arise from the different positions. I suggest that he not get stuck in any one position, and I also keep reminding him: KEEP COMING BACK TO THE NOW, TO THIS MOMENT.

Just in case there's any confusion about the distinction between here and now awareness and free-association, let me explain briefly. Here and now awareness refers to actual on-going perceptions through one's senses: now I see the grimace on your face; now I feel the tension in my arm; now I feel teary; now I go blank. Free-association:

* Paper presented at the Annual Meetings of the American Group Psychotherapy Association, February 1977, San Francisco.

is a broader concept which actually includes here and now awareness but also includes many other things. "I remember my old bedroom now; I'm wondering what brought that up; I have no idea but I'm convinced it's important; yes, you seem to get more interested as I say this," etc. etc.

Perls of course was very critical of free-association and scornfully referred to it as free-dissociation, convinced that all too many analysts allowed the patient to drone on interminably and get lost in bogs of unproductive nonsense. This is no time to deal with this important question at length, but I do wish to state my faith that the process of free-association can be an infinitely rich and creative tool for finding out about one's self and for facilitating growth. The very possibility of aboutism, overwordiness, intellectualizations which seem inherent dangers in the psychoanalytic process can be beautifully corrected for by the gestalt-oriented emphasis on action, the sense of the now, the therapist's sharing of himself and the blunt feed-back when necessary that the client is just futzing around.

At any rate, it seems that my gestalt training, with its emphasis on the leader's activity, on the close and immediate feedback of some minutiae of patient behavior, and perhaps also on the need for tempo in a group situation, has unfitted me for applying this method in groups. For me there is an interesting and poignant parallel here: my original analytic training with its cognitive-interpretive emphasis absolutely unfitted me for learning gestalt. I suffered and stewed for many a year, having come to rely so much on my reasoning that I was unwilling to give reign to my sense-observations and to my

intuitive reactions. This unasked-for karma I shall probably continue to carry around.

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But now, more specifically to the matter of running groups.

There is one feature of doing groups and workshops that I need hardly remind you of: the sheer wonder and richness of the possibilities. It is a process and an experience so infinitely rich and so complex that there is little chance of fully encompassing its facets, its many wonders. How many opportunities for the highest drama, side-splitting hilarity, depth of anguish and of almost superhuman sharing and caring. When the process goes and things click, there can be a sense of transcendence and fullness of being which we can savor for many a year. No technique can account for this, only some happy combination of people having the courage and the concern to really be with each other.

My basic orientation is that of a gestalt therapist. I'm sure that the methods and principles of gestalt therapy are sufficiently well-known that I can pass quickly over some of the main features.

1) The matter of the hot-seat. For me this simply means that a member of the group makes the decision to work. I like to point out that there are two ways of working: with a program and without a program. With a program is simply announcing a particular problem or problem area that the patient wants to explore. But working without a program can also be a most intriguing and exhilarating experience. There are many times when you somehow sort-of want to work but don't know on what. This is one fascinating contribution of the gestalt

method. Just the willingness to stay with and report moment to moment perceptions, sensations reactions, and--for that matter--the absence of sensations, commonly leads to a rich and meaningful development. If I may quote myself, "Elements of surprise occur so often that surprise is no longer surprising."

As I'm writing this (talking about free-association) I'm having a feeling of fatigue and slight foolishness at the idea of encompassing in a brief paper the principles and methods of a subject as broad as gestalt therapy. So obviously I'll just content myself with focussing on a few features which grab my attention.

2) A principle with which gestalt therapy has become widely identified is the matter of the here and now.

The idea of the now, of the immediate moment, of the content and structure of present experience, is one of the most potent, most pregnant, and most elusive principles of Gestalt therapy. Speaking from my own experience (A.L.) I must say that I have been at various times intrigued, angered, baffled and exhilarated by the implications of the seemingly simple idea "being in the now." And what a fascinating experience it is to help others become aware of the manifold ways in which they prevent themselves from having true immediate awareness.

In order to promote "now" awareness we encourage communications in the present tense. What do you feel at this moment? The phrase "what is your now?" is an effective one from therapist to patient.

It would not be accurate to say that there is no interest in historical material and in the past. This material is dealt with actively when it is felt to be germane to important themes of the

present personality structure. However, one finds that the most effective means of integrating past material into the personality is to bring it--as fully as possible--into the present. In this way we avoid the bland, intellectualized "about-isms" and strive vigorously to give all material the impact of immediacy. When the patient refers to events of yesterday, last week or last year, we quickly direct him to "be there" in fantasy and to enact the drama in present terms.

We are active in pointing out to the patient how easily he leaves "the now." His need to bring into the dialogue absent individuals, the nostalgic urge to reminisce, the tendency to get preoccupied with fears and fantasies of the future--these are identified for him. For most of us, the exercise of remaining in present awareness is a taxing discipline which can be maintained only for short periods. It is a discipline to which we are not accustomed and which we are inclined to resist.

I do find however that it is possible to get pretty silly and dogmatic about the here and now. Fritz's whole point was that his methods and rules were guides and not dogmas. If we convert the idea of the now into another SHOULD: you should be in the here and now, then we may easily fall into a foolish corruption of the basic spirit.

After all, what we are after, in any kind of therapy, of growth-facilitation is to help people be real, be their own true selves; not some phony imitation of a famous guru. An example occurs to me from a seminar I was conducting. I had as a guest a well-known gestaltist. During the discussion I turned to him and asked, "What did you think of the point Joe made a few minutes ago?" Disdainfully he replied,

"That was then, I'm now." For me that was a classic example of phoniness and bullshit. The simple fact is that we do have brains and there's no law against using them. There is a past and we do have a concept of the future and to pretend otherwise is sheer nonsense.

For me the value of the here and now idea is that it is both a technique and a way of being. As a way of being, it is sufficiently lofty and difficult that we may as well be modest in our expectations. An individual who is very together, who has a minimum of unfinished business from the past will just naturally be in the now; he won't have to work at it. But if, in some artificial manner, you convert this profound principle into a forced should, then you have just that--forced, unspontaneous, unreal behavior.

3) I would like to turn for a moment to the role of the leader in gestalt groups. We often hear the accusation that the gestalt therapist is controlling or authoritarian. Gestalt techniques do indeed require an almost fiercely active and leader-centered approach. But this approach is to be sharply distinguished from authoritarian control. Although the gestaltist is active in making suggestions for exercises and experiments, he is not at all interested in telling people how to live their lives. If anything, some people in the gestalt movement feel that autonomy has been over-emphasized at the cost of underplaying human interdependency.

However, I do believe, as I point out in my article with James Simkin (1), that the very feature of leader-centeredness entails important consequences. Group initiative can be underplayed. The complex dynamics which develop through efforts at decision-making

might not get enough attention in gestalt-oriented groups. The patterns of interaction among individuals with their parallels in family structure can too easily be overlooked.

I like to point out to my groups that in my opinion one of the most powerful forces known in human behavior is the power of group creativity. I ask my group members to gradually feel more and more free, even when I am working intensively with one member, to contribute their observations. But I point out that this is a risky and demanding procedure. For we know how often the temptation is to speak up, not for the purpose of truly facilitating the individual's on-going work, but for the purpose of calling attention to one's own cleverness and gathering brownie stamps. However, as the group truly becomes more cohesive and honestly and genuinely attends to the needs of the member who is working, a true group creativity can be set in motion which is deeply gratifying. Just as in the case of working with an empathic co-leader, it can be the greatest of pleasures to be able to turn for help to some of the group members whose perceptions and insights are particularly penetrating at some point. As this spirit catches on more and more a kind of group intelligence develops which I am convinced is superior to the skill of even highly gifted leaders.

Naturally this development requires time and patience, but the results are most worthwhile.

There have been any number of occasions, for instance, when I recognized my limitations in understanding the needs of a woman in the group. Having her join, fish-bowl style, with the other women in the group has often set forces in motion which I as an individual male therapist could not have brought about.

4) Lastly, I would like to make some remarks on the so-called problem of technique. (Again, here, I am drawing on sections of my paper with Simkin.)

Like any other therapy worthy of the name, gestalt aims for authenticity. In seeking authenticity we must break many bonds and face many challenges. It is the courageous struggling with these bonds--of society, family, one's own nature--that confers authenticity. Authenticity is truly being one's self. It is the most impressive human accomplishment. It probably is the state of grace.

If we regard the therapist in the light of authenticity it becomes all too clear that he cannot teach what he does not know. If he tries to cover up the thinness of his understanding through glib reliance on skills and gimmicks, then he is simply imparting to his patients that particular neurosis or bit of phoniness.

A therapist with some experience really knows within himself that he is communicating to his patient his own fears as well as his courage, his defensiveness as well as his openness, his confusion as well as his clarity. The therapist's acceptance and sharing of these truths can be a highly persuasive demonstration of his own authenticity. You don't acquire this overnight. It's a lifetime project.

I am much impressed by an approach of a highly-respected woman colleague. She tells her groups that she reserves the right--if she gets stuck--to work on her problem of the moment. I know of no better way of modelling openness for the group members. I don't claim such openness for myself, though I find that I slowly move in this direction.

But I do have a curious reaction of my own which occurs with surprising frequency. From time to time, when I'm feeling with it and working with a good flow and one of the members has had a particularly moving experience, I unaccountably burst into a flood of tears. I truly don't know what I'm crying about at the moment, though intellectually I'm vaguely aware that my tears are about six months overdue. There was something I needed to cry about a half year ago, and I finally got round to it. My formulation for this is: Here and now I'm somewhere else.

One last comment. You might call this the technique of non-technique. I'm sorry I have never had the opportunity to observe the work of Gertrude Krause. Gertrude is in her seventies, I believe, the director of the Florida Gestalt Institute. As a lay person, she was trained by Fritz way back in the fifties. Gertrude told me with quite simple conviction that when she approaches working with someone, she truly has a very empty mind. She hasn't the faintest anticipation of what's going to happen. She says she has probably invented about a thousand gestalt techniques but she doesn't remember any. There's no need to. Obviously the next time a need arises she'll invent another one. It was thrilling to hear this.

Myself, I have invented probably several dozen techniques. But, damn it, I remember them! Maybe with a little luck I'll develop memory problems!

1. Levitsky, Abraham and Simkin, James S. Gestalt Therapy. In New Perspectives on Encounter Groups. Edited by Solomon, Lawrence N. and Berzon, Betty. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1972.