

## Interview with Abe Levitsky. April 24, 1988

- C: I have not prepared but am aware of many things I would like to talk about with you. a way this could be organized is chronology allowing for the spontaneous concatenation of thought. I know that when we met at Fritz and Jims workshop in , you were then visiting from St. Louis and you had a background in psychotherapy and hypnoanalysis. When, sometime later, I was invited to join in the foundation of the S.F.G. I., I formed the impression that you had been the main force behind that initiative.
- A: That needs to be amended somewhat. The Gestalt institute was founded actually in 1967. I was still in St. Louis. The institute was founded by Cyndy Sheldon and Jack Downing and Janie Rhine and of all things Paul Baum and you were in from the beginning but I was not. I came to live here the following year, 1968. So I joined the institute a year after it was founded. And it was in that year that Fritz asked Bob Hall to go from Esalen to San Francisco to take charge of the institute or something like that. It was a little bit presumptuous. That was the sequence of events.
- I: You have not been much of a writer. You have been a therapist and a presence in the Gestalt movement. A networker without even setting out to be one. You organized the first Gestalt event, I suppose, the Berkeley Conference.
- A: Cyndy and I did that together. It was her idea and I collaborated with her so that it was organized by the two of us. And this was to celebrate the 20th. anniversary of the San Francisco institute. And then you took initiative last year with Cyndy to bring about the third West Coast meeting, which I was sorry to miss since I was in Italy at the time but I think it was very true to the Gestalt spirit in that it was the only one conference without a schedule that has taken place in the field. And that is another topic I would like you to say a little on before we get into the other aspects which would be something on your views on gestalt hypnosis the analytic heritage and then the transpersonal or however you call it the spiritual ingredient that you like others have been finding so congruent with gestalt.
- A: Perhaps I will begin by saying a few words about what was the major structure of our meeting last year at Esalen. The most important part of it was that 6 people were asked to give about a 20 minute talk entitled, "My journey as a therapist the joys and the sorrows." The speakers were Bob Hall, Bob Martin, Erv Polster, myself, Cyndy and Gerry Kogan. Those were very revealing and very moving talks and they tended to center around experiences with Fritz. Bob Martin for instance pointed out very movingly how Fritz 's using the technique of the impasse led him to an impasse which was difficult for him to endure but nevertheless had the result of plunging him into a period of artistic creativity which he then was able to use in his gestalt work. One of Bob Hall's important points was that he felt that Fritz empowered him to be a therapist and to be successful but did not empower him as a man. And one of Bob's points that



tended to be borne out by the ensuing discussion was that the training encounters with Fritz produced a number of "wounded men". The way in which this applied to me; I was reminded of a statement I made to Fritz on an occasion when I was working with him. I don't know whether you were present at that time but it happened on the occasion when we were in the workshop together and I said to him that I felt that the hands that were giving birth to me were choking me. I felt that this was a good formulation of the ambivalence that I felt towards him. Now that summer I lived with him in the same house and we became very friendly and there were many aspects of our relationship which were very satisfying and very illuminating but I can also remember writing in my journal at the time "this is a fascinating summer, I hope I survive it." He was also very rough. And he said to me on one occasion when - I came to him saying that to my surprise I was catching on very slowly, that somehow this work was not being assimilated by me with the ease that I expected - "I think you are going to be an outstanding therapist actually, ~~and see, you do will~~ but I don't pull any punches with you - either you make it or you don't". I remember that when I came at the beginning of the summer in June, I met him in February 1966 and spent a five day workshop with him and it was on that occasion that we became friendly with one another so he invited me back for that summer. On the first occasion of our meeting when I arrived at Esalen he said to "I am 95% sure you are ready to be a gestalt therapist." Interestingly enough he was 95% wrong. Because my learning of gestalt therapy was very very slow and I would say that it was not until something like three or four years afterward that I began to feel a degree of comfort being a gestalt therapist. I have written about this a little in a paper of mine entitled reflections on gestalt therapy which I can find for you if you like but the fact is that both by training and by natural inclination (since much of my training was neoanalytic) my natural inclination is toward interpretation and intellectualizing. As a matter of fact I can remember Fritz saying to me that I had an "interpretation neurosis". And I agreed and I could see that I had difficulties in being led by my sense impressions of a person I was working with and being able to be guided by that rather than by my analytic concepts and interpretative impulses. It took a lot of work to get past that, and as a matter of fact that has rather been my karma in this work; gradually learning to get over that. A very interesting and important influence on me in this respect has been my friendship and association with Gideon. Gideon discovered for himself while he was in training with Fritz that as he watched Fritz work with individuals that he was getting fantasies and associations that were then corroborated by things that Fritz did, so that he became more and more confident of his own intuitive abilities. Gideon and I established a relationship in which we became from time to time mutual therapists. Sometimes he was patient and I was therapist and I was gradually learning through him to have more and more confidence in the inner intuitions that would arise in me. Interestingly enough and

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characteristically, these intuitions would be of a somewhat intellectual and interpretative nature, but nevertheless useful and as time went on I got more and more at ease in following these intuitions that occurred to me, I would express them they would prove to be productive, so that was the nature of my development.

I: So Gideon was more of a trainer than Fritz perhaps to you, and Fritz was more the therapist.

A: That is a fair statement. Jim Simkin also did a great deal for me. My participation in a workshop with him, for example, and some individual work that I did with him did a lot to ground me in the procedures of gestalt and those things helped to very, very gradually make me more confident as a gestalt worker, so that I could work with the material that I saw before me with less need for history and the account of the individuals development which I still use to some extent but for which I have less and less need as time goes on.

I: would you say a bit more about your contact with Jim. He designated you to write the preface to his book.

A: In addition to writing the preface I also organized the material He had a bunch of raini lectures which were lying around in typed form but without sequence or organization or structure so essentially I organized it for him and also wrote the introduction. The material was there, but scattered. It needed only putting together. it was not a demanding organizing job, but one that needed to be done. it had been lying around for several years for some reason, I did not quite understand why. He did not have as we know a very effective intellectually organizing mind; I could provide that. He appreciated that and he liked the outcome. Aside from that Jim did a lot for me in showing me how he used his observations and leaned on them and relied on them.

I: Many people in this area have had an authority conflict with Jim from the time when he took on the role of single source of accreditation for gestalt therapists in California, and some people did not grant him such special authority. Do you have any comments on that?

A: I do not not have a great deal to say about that. It happens that when they had an accrediting procedure in which a number of people were called together and asked to demonstrate their ability etc etc. I was not there. I was still living in St. Louis and I would not have submitted myself to that procedure at that point because i was still unsure of myself as a Gestaltist. That was happening in about 67 or 68.

I: did you get accreditation from somebody?

A: No, I simply joined the institute and became an active member of it, eventually took my turn as president, etc. To begin with Jim and I were quite good friends, we enjoyed each other socially. At the same time, you know, Jim and I were almost classmates at Michigan, he was one year ahead of me, so we had that in common. But it became necessary for him to play the role of the older brother and he was a bit aggressive about it. It happened commonly that there



were little bits of jousting between us. It was very parallel to things that happened between Fritz and myself: they would make sarcastic comments. But I was pretty facile at taking care of myself so I handled it perfectly well. They were jousts and I had some resentments, but they were of a mild nature very much overshadowed by the essential affection between us and the many things that we had in common. So there was a good deal of mutuality in the relationship.

I: You told me sometime ago that the most striking thing during the Esalen conference, in addition to the level of communication between those who were there, was the level of ambivalence towards both Fritz and Jim. Maybe that would be worth further comment.

A: I see a very distinct parallel between what happened between Freud and his followers and Fritz and his students. Freud's orthodoxy and his impatience with any straying from the fold was introjected by the early analysts, so the phenomenon of so-called orthodox psychoanalysis became very important. That there had to be so many interviews per week; the patient had to lie down; the therapist was a neutral screen, that free association was used almost exclusively, etc etc. I believe this was largely an introjection of Freud's personality. In a similar way it seems to me Fritz had his own severe top dog and although he often worked lovingly, with affection and support, he also worked with sarcasm, with belittling, with anger and often with righteous anger, and inherently there is no reason whatsoever why the lore of gestalt therapy needs to be accompanied by this load of somewhat aggressive and one upping kind of attitude on the part of the therapist. Gestalt as a mode of exploration of the individuals psyche and as a mode of permitting to flower whatever it is in the client can be done with a strict approach or can be done with a gentle and loving approach. Fritz's own formulation is the best that I have found. He said we look for the proper frustration /support balance. So it becomes a very interesting question what is a proper frustration support balance. And of course that balance is experienced differently by different individuals, and by different combinations of patient and therapist. As is well know he prided himself on being a master frustrator. There is no reason to believe that that is therapeutic.

I: It can be therapeutic. If it is expression of personal relationship not of technique - which was the case in him. The dialogic element adds to the aliveness of the process, but it is not one of those things to be introjected.

A: Exactly, and I think the important point is that there is no inherent connection between the whole approach in gestalt and the manner and approach and role of the therapist. It can be employed harshly, as Fritz often did, or it can be employed gently. It is possible as, I see it, to sin in both directions. There can be over-support and there can be under-support. The fact that Bob Resnick's little paper on "chicken soup is poison" was so highly regarded in the early days of gestalt is, I feel, somewhat unfortunate. The way I see it, the compulsive



withholding of "chicken soup" is also poison. So the point seems to be to know oneself to have good perspective as to what are the growth needs of the client and to provide support where that seems to enhance the growth process and provide frustration where that seems to enhance the growth process. Looking at the general development of gestalt I would say that the movement has been in the direction of greater gentleness. For myself especially at the outset I introjected Fritz to such an extent that he once said to me "you seem to have swallowed me completely." And as part of that swallowing I would find myself poking fun at people, being sarcastic, one upping them, etc. I had to very gradually learn that I was doing that and that I was not doing therapy but just being a show-off.

I: You spoke of a growing orthodoxy as in psychoanalysis. this brings to mind the issue of East and West.

A: So called Eastern Gestalt and Western Gestalt?

I: Yes. It would seem that the West coast is still less orthodox than the East coast. I wonder if you have any comments on this.

A: I haven't spent any time on the East coast so I am not qualified to talk about that. My impression agrees with yours, that the West coast has permitted a broader development of gestalt.

I: There is a view of Fritz on the East coast that he became a hippy and an unreliable person when he came to Esalen. My view of him is that indeed he appreciated psychedelics after his treatment in Israel that opened him up. He became a sort of gypsy and sympathetic to the counter culture. And he started to dance and to be much more free, and he embraced a position of not relying on intellectual support. The East coast disdains his turning away from intellectual interests and I have not seen the anti intellectual position defended. It looks like on the West coast there is an anti-intellectual spirit which is part also of the spirit of the sixties - a disillusionment concerning the extent to which the interpretation and the intellectual understanding can be helpful, and also an appreciation of the possibility of an experientialism not supported in theory but only on intuition and experience. But still I have not seen a spokesmen for this position.

A: I am most comfortable expressing my own position, because for many years now I have labeled myself a "gestalt analyst" so that when I work with people the basic point that I make to them is that for me the two most effective methods for self exploration are the Perlsian awareness continuum - the appreciation of the here and now - on the one hand, and on the other hand the Freudian free association. I try to teach people both things, and I have tried to teach them a fluidity in moving from one to the other. I have illustrated this also in this paper of mine entitled "Some Reflections on Gestalt Therapy". . . An example of how I used that is in regard to the face to face positions of therapist. Often enough I encourage the patient to sit in my chair, which is a swivel chair, and to experiment with different position of the chair but to be aware of what leads



them to experiment with facing partly away, 3/4th away, completely away and to be aware of the sensations that they have in doing that; what happens with their associations in doing that. This is obviously a modified analytic approach, and at the same time a Gestaltian approach in that I am constantly encouraging them to return to the now of their sense observations.

- I: I share an appreciation of psychoanalysis and analytic therapy, but it is not quite the same as the issue of theory because one can use free association as Fromm suggested as occasion for two people look into what happens with one of them, bypassing any particular formulations of Freud, Klein or whoever came after. Still, I have the impression that Fritz was very much supported when he wanted Freud's approbation in the early days, after attending the conference in Vienna. If I read today *ego hunger and aggression* I cannot help feeling it was a bit ridiculous to put out the idea that by better chewing one might avoid war - and that just as some old doctors used to recommend sex as cure of hysteria - he is recommending biological aggression as a cure for greed. I think that he recruited Paul Goodman to be a good translator of gestalt experience into terms acceptable to the psychoanalytic community of the times, and still I continue feeling that he was essentially somebody like a shaman. It is true he was a kind of crypto analyst. He had a lot of psychoanalytic experience behind him, and even while he was putting down psychoanalysis he was using psychoanalytic insight. But I admire him the most in the attitude portrayed in his autobiography where he stands naked as he says that Buber needs Judaism, Sartre communism, Heidegger existentialism but that he does not need any support other than that of his own two feet. I suppose that this is an idea that maybe of his California disciples appreciated, be the people who think like this are the people who are least inclined to talk.
- A: I am not sure exactly how to comment on this. In line with my calling myself a gestalt analyst I have a kind of theoretical structure of my own on which I have done a little work. I showed it to you a long time ago in the form of an outline. Self acceptance. And also one of the main notions I introduced in this outline is what I call the self perpetuation of a neurosis.
- I: I would think it would be every interesting to get the gist of that into the interview.
- A: I don't have the material as available to myself at t this moment as I would like. I can only say that my observations are that as I work with the individual I try to both discover and show him the investment that he has in his own neurosis and the need to perpetuate it. It sort of works this way. As neurosis is an interruption in emotional development, our job is to look for the ways and the places in which the development has been interrupted. The point seems to be that growing up is in its very nature frightening, and therefore we all try in one way or another to avoid it. One way I have expressed it is that if love and intimacy were easy we would all be doing it. But in fact very few people are doing it. So wherever you have a neurotic situation this person is inhibited in



love and intimacy and has a very powerful investment in maintaining the position of the neurosis. What I find particularly interesting is the dynamics of what I call self-perpetuation. Simply to say there is a repetition compulsion does not feel satisfying. I look for what one might call the "existential roots" of the self-perpetuation. That is, if the patient can "prove" that the current situation simply repeats the old situation, then he need not "take it seriously" and relate creatively. He now has an excuse for discouragement and resignation.

I: repetition compulsion. Yes, so you are in favor of conceptual orientation that could be a supplement to practice. and I agree with you to, although I am sympathetic for the position of those who have practiced gestalt without appreciation for the early theory gestalt which was what lay behind my question. I personally feel that the Paul Goodman formulation of the 50s would hardly lead anyone to imagine what gestalt therapy is like and is not very congruent with it. In other words and I am moved to talk about it as we sit here now in a way I have not been moved before because I have recently been in Europe where I met people from France and realized that there is a new orthodoxy building up there around this fetish of this somewhat obsolete formulation.

A: As with the history of psychoanalysis the danger that you have to avoid is the danger of any kind of over theorizing, overconceptualizing or over intellectualizing. The beauty of Gestalt is, as I see it, that it sensitizes us to the limitation of mere intellectual insights. Our job is helping the person truly incorporate insight and translate it into ways of understanding and ways of being and thinking and living that truly embody these insights. Fritz himself put it very well when he said that he felt the great advantage of gestalt therapy is that it helps us to unite thought and feeling.

I: Would you like to say something about hypnosis.?

A: As you know I have worked with hypnosis. I have written an article combining gestalt therapy with hypnosis. I am convinced that hypnosis can be used in ways that are not authoritarian not merely suggestive, as ways of uncovering, of freeing, of intensifying a variety of experiences. In the same way that Gestalt methods can help a person recover and relive and reassimilate a variety of experience including traumatic experiences, hypnosis is a modality which can further facilitate and intensify.

I: Of course trance facilitates access to memories and the process of merging with one's feelings. But I have not read your article.

A: It was published in the book *The Growing Edge of Gestalt Therapy*.

I: So you have worked with people under trance using the usual gestalt techniques, and I suppose it is more impressive; that you have an increased capacity to work in those directions with people.

A: Let me give a couple of examples that come to mind. In a gestalt group that I was conducting I was demonstrating hypnosis with a variety of individuals. there was one woman (and I mention this in my article) who, it seems, had a



compulsion to go into hypnotic states. when I noticed this I gave her the instruction "I am going to ask you to do a variety of things but do them and do not go into hypnosis. I would like you to raise your right arm and not go into hypnosis. I would like you to put your hand behind your back and not go into hypnosis. I would like you to close your eyes and not go into hypnosis." She couldn't do that. any time you gave her that kind of instruction she would go into a hypnotic trance. The need for compliance and the dependency need implied by this kind of behavior made it very clear what kind of childlike position she had towards the world. I could then go ahead and work with that in a more gestalt like way. showing this too her and offering her varieties of opportunities for become more self reliant and self sufficient.

I: in trance or out of trance.

A: Both. For me the more impressive way of doing at that point was out of trance, for instance she still felt herself to be more the compliant and controlled and less the self reliant person. So for her staying out of hypnosis was ...

I: the real trance.

A: Another event I have done with Jack Rosenberg. I had been interested for some time in this experiment. I was interested in placing a therapist in hypnosis and then having him go ahead and do his therapeutic work. In a group I conducted on one occasion I placed Jack under hypnosis and put him in charge of the group, and then he went ahead and worked with a number of people. Interestingly enough, it was in this last get-together at Esalen last June that he approached me and said that for him this was a very transformational experience for at that moment it gave him the confidence to trust his extraordinary sensitivity to people's body reactions and following that he began to develop it.

I: It falls in line with old experiments in the use of hypnosis for the enhancement of creativity.

A: That very occasion resulted in another very interesting phenomenon because one of the subjects that Jack was working with went into a hypnotic state and automatically regressed to an event in childhood when he was about 6 years old and had suffered some accident with his leg. At that point the subject got so deeply involved in that regressive experience that I had to step in and help him deal with the grief associated with that and gradually come out of that regressed stage which he had automatically popped into.

I: Jack's trance helped induce that regression?

A: we could only speculate about that. it is a very good guess, because there I was essentially the group leader. The mere fact that I was saying "we are using hypnosis" was a suggestion to the entire group, so when Jack momentarily takes over in the position of a group leader and works with an individual my suggestion that hypnosis is in the air continues with this person and evidentially has the effect of helping him regress to a significant early experience.



I: You have shared with me before something of your very innovative exploration of "reverse Adam therapy" and I wonder whether you would like to extend this sharing to our readers. Some shamans that I have known in South America take drugs to help their healing activity rather than administering them to their patients, but I have not known of this being done in modern psychotherapy.

A: In relatively recent times, before ADAM became illegal I hit on the idea of what I call the reverse ADAM trip in which the patient does not take any substance but I do and we set aside a period of some two to four hours during which I take this I call quasi psychedelic substance and we just sit around for several hours and relate to one another. I have had a number of experiences along these lines that have been very encouraging. People always feel that they get a lot out of it and the point is really in overview quite simple. One is that my intuitive abilities are enhanced; I use the information I have about the person in more penetrating ways, but I also develop a touch where I can say fairly powerful things about the other without being threatening. I find it very natural to be self disclosing, and this seems to be very much appreciated by the person I am working with. I do it in my own home, and in addition to the fact that we are just sitting in my office (my office is in my home) at these particular times I open the rest of my home to the person so we truly are in my home and not just sitting in my office. I like to play host, to serve coffee and cookies and that sort of thing, and I find myself being in a way which is very satisfying to me just being myself and having a good time and still not losing sight of the fact that we are doing something called therapy, that I am making an effort to teach the person things about himself. And this teaching needed not take the form of my making formulations. We might easily go into formal therapeutic moments for ten fifteen or twenty minutes we will do some "ordinary" psychotherapy, but I will not be an ordinary psychotherapist. I will be a somewhat expanded, looser, more natural and - I would say - more loving and more accepting of Abe, and that sets up a very delightful therapeutic milieu. There is room for a great range of emotions, some of which are sad, some of which are painful, but many of which are delightfully humorous; the kind of humor that often comes from the psychedelic perspective of seeing things in their broader sense and introducing a very welcome cosmic humor so a person can laugh at his own foibles. I laugh and we laugh at each other and it is some of the most exciting and satisfying therapeutic work that I have done so I am delighted to have hit on this mode.

I: As I mentioned before I think this may be an extreme instance of what has been called dialogic therapy which is to say giving prominence to the aspect of therapy that lies beyond strategy, appreciating the relationship-aspect as contribution to the therapeutic process itself. I would be interested in hearing not only what happens in the session, which you have described so well, but what happens in the aftermath - that is to say - what this has done to your therapy or your patients.



- A: It is not easily to say or to be very specific.
- I: Has the quality of the relationship changed afterward?
- A: Definitely, the quality of the relationship has changed. It is easier, it is more mutual, it is more natural it is more trusting. It would be an exaggeration to say that the situation changes from night to day; there is still a great deal of work to be done, and furthermore, it has been a good idea to repeat the experience. With every good therapy, good things happen, there is growth, there is mutual knowing, there is pleasure of the fun and the good times shared, there is the seeing of the therapist much more three dimensionally, as a human being more than a mouthpiece of abstract therapeutic wisdom. All of those things feel wholesome and lifelike.
- I: And I imagine that if relationship is changed in the direction you describe, this has served as a context to make yourself more productive in sessions after that.
- A: Yes, it has definitely been that.
- I: I think you have been very daring in doing that. It has a precedent in cultures where shamans take drugs while they see their patients rather than giving them to them, but I do not know of other therapists doing it.
- A: I am interested in your calling it daring. A number of people say that. Looking at it from a certain point of view it is daring because I could not have done it before. For a variety of reasons, I just wasn't comfortable enough. Letting these various sides of myself be seen. For instance, I can comfortably regress at such moments to being a little boy. I can say "I am cold", "I am shivery", "I need to get under this blanket". "I need to abandon you for ten minutes while I get some rest". I can say "please, do not talk for a long while because I feel very sensitive at this moment and you may upset me"; so in a lot of ways to call a spade a spade is daring, yet I do not experience it as daring.
- I: I can understand that. It speaks very well of you, because you are not defensive, you do not have anything to defend, you are comfortable already in your relationships.
- A: And there is also by the way the pleasure of letting myself be seen.
- I: I would like to ask you about your latest involvement, which seems congruent with gestalt. Would you say something about Nisargadatta Maharaj, his ideas and your own experience in absorbing these ideas?
- A: This area is not so easy to talk about. Generally my position is that the therapist is in a sense teaching what he is and what he knows. The more evolved one is, the better model you are of what it is that a human being can become. Most of us move in and out of these states of higher consciousness or a capacity to be truly in the now, etc. As far as I am concerned my attainments along these lines are modest. At the same time, I have a very deep faith that there is such a thing as enlightenment and there seem to me to be stages of enlightenment. The more I feel it the more I have it in myself. The more I can relay it to the persons whom I am working with, the more I feel such concepts as being in the moment, dying to the moment, allowing the former moment to be relinquished, the more