

“Know there will be pleasure, there will be suffering, and I am in the present, in the moment.”



An Oral History of Gestalt Therapy;

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Interviews with those involved in the original development of Gestalt:

- Laura Perls
- Isadore From
- Erving Polster
- Miriam Polster
- Elliott Shapiro

As I write these notes I reflect on the impact of these wonderful Gestalt pioneers, who as explorers of the psychotherapeutic landscape not only created Gestalt psychotherapy but also the core concepts which form significant aspects of the known and unconscious foundations of my life's work as a Transactional Analyst psychotherapist, trainer and supervisor. I owe them a great debt as I reflect on their ideas; creations of original, evolutionary thinking and practice. In these conversations they show great honesty and enthusiasm in their willingness to engage with the endeavour and art of psychotherapy. I also want to acknowledge the privileged living experience I had as a client of Gestalt therapist and trainer Peter Philipsson for 5 years in Manchester UK.



A conversation with Laura Perls (May 1977)

- a) Body work is an integral aspect of holistic gestalt psychotherapy – the origins of Laura Perls ideas about the role of the body come not from Reich / Alexander etc – but from her study and experience of contemporary dance.
- b) Laura who had a doctorate in psychology and had trained as a psychoanalyst when living in Berlin researched the methods of feeding and weaning babies.
- c) Based on her research Fritz Perls wrote his first paper for a psychoanalytic conference in Czechoslovakia in 1936 entitled “Oral resistances”. She describes how Fritz expected his ideas to be accepted as an advancement of psychoanalysis in the 1936 conference, but he was in fact mostly rejected. Laura was in psychoanalysis every day for 2.5 years while also working with Gestalt psychologists – and she found it all too much “it didn't go together”.
- d) Laura says that “stuff is stuffed into little kids... leading to introjection. They are not allowed time to chew”. These ideas were central to her developing concentration on the detailed daily activities of eating, dressing, walking etc. In its essence, gestalt therapy was a revisionist Freudian psychoanalytic approach developed round the concept of what and how we eat.

- e) Married in 1930 they move from Germany to South Africa – “sent by Ernest Jones”- president of the international psychoanalytic association to form a psychoanalytic foundation. However due to decisions by the association in 1938 they had to give up their training institute in South Africa. (In Gestalt Therapy Verbatim – Fritz says that Jones asked for volunteers – and while the others asked for guarantees, Fritz said no to guarantees, but that he was prepared to take the risk – the others were all killed by the Nazis)
- f) By then she says “I paid a great deal of attention not only to what people said but also to their breathing, their co-ordination. I started to do body work and sit opposite my patients”.
- g) If I wanted someone to lie down I had them lie on the floor and do experiments with co-ordination and alignment. While: “At that time Fritz was still addicted to the couch and never quite got rid of it” She tells how Fritz smoked when the patient was on the couch – up to 4 packs a day – “he would have lived 10 years longer if he had not smoked”. However, she says “When sitting behind the patient on the couch I knitted otherwise I would have smoked”
- h) In 1946 Fritz moved to New York and Laura followed in 1947 – Fritz went on to work with Wilhelm Reich for a while, however they both still described themselves as psychoanalysts. This changed in 1950 with the publication of the book Gestalt Therapy”, co-written with Paul Goodman and followed by the development of the Gestalt Institute in 1952.
- i) As Laura became successful she and Fritz “drifted apart” he could not stand criticism from people such as Paul Weis and so he left New York. Afterwards Laura describes how Gestalt became identified with what Fritz did: “He was pre-occupied by his “hot seat method”. “That is fine for a demonstration, but you cannot carry on a whole therapy that way. Yet people do. I think people are limiting themselves and doing a lot of harm.”
- j) She describes how Fritz said that individual therapy was obsolete because “he couldn’t be bothered anymore”. In the last 10 years he only worked with professional people who had already done their own therapies, however Laura describes working for 40 years with individuals and groups.
- k) Laura describes how therapy is the moment to moment, whatever comes up from the past as memories must have significance now. Gestalt is not an encounter approach which imposes itself on the patient. “Gestalt therapy is existential, experiential and experimental... The Gestalt therapist uses himself and herself ... whatever applies at the time, to the actual situation, a patient, a group, a trainee. Experience is on the boundary, go too quickly and there is a lack of support leading to anxiety. “I work with contact and support and experience”. Without a clear boundary experience the client is open to projection and introjection.
- l) She describes how Field theory originates from physics (Max Planck) and was brought into Gestalt - using the term I am aware, “like the space between breathing in and out. The awareness”. We make choices in terms of what is dominant, what is of interest – foreground is of greatest interest and “of course, how it relates to the background”
- m) Resistances (blocks) are fixed Gestalten which interrupt contact. Therapy is to “de-automatize” these blocks. First comes awareness, then exaggeration leads to experimentation and the possibility of different directions. Every patient brings what they have and finding what is possible – leading to development, not getting better or worse but change, things just are. “Life is change”.
- n) Laura describes how the leader can also become a block, people imitating their style. Fritz was in theatre, and he wanted to become a theatre director. His hot seat work was based on 50 years’ experience knowing who he could and could not work with in that way. At the same

time, he and Laura were both suspicious of the “joy boys, the miracle people”. All the instant things.

- o) Joy and happiness are by-products of good functioning. Suffering is also an aspect of creative living. “Know there will be pleasure, there will be suffering, and I am in the present, in the moment.” She says that “Pursuit of happiness is very illegitimate – its incidental.”



A conversation with Isadore From June 1978

This conversation starts with a lovely description of his search for a low-cost therapy – and how this led him to the shabby and worn-down office and person of Fritz Perls in New York shortly after he arrived there from South Africa. He informed him he would not work with him as he needed paying clients, he said with courage “I can’t wait”, and mentioned he was studying phenomenology. At which point he commanded him to lie down on the couch. He then told me to describe everything I experienced and to begin each sentence with “here and now”. He sat behind me and I remember no words that he said to me.

- a) He then recalls only two experiences with him: Fritz asking if he was having sexual fantasies about him. Followed by another episode in which he told him shocking details of his experiences to which he said nothing, leading to her becoming angry and throwing an ashtray at him. To which he replied “good – good – good”. He then wonders if he was saying good because he missed him!
- b) After a while Fritz referred him on to work with Laura Perls who he experienced as more supportive and more in direct contact, sitting in front of him, while hhe was still lying on the couch, rather than behind him like Fritz had done. When he went on to become a therapist he copied Laura rather than Fritz.
- c) Isadore describes at length how he became a therapist; at Fritz’s insistence and after two years he took over all his practice. He goes onto describe the writing of the book Gestalt Therapy. The theory was written by Paul Goodman, starting with a poor manuscript that Fritz had written. He describes the influences on the book particularly from Otto Rank, Wilhelm Reich and of others.
- d) There follows a long discussion about commencing training others in Gestalt and the dangers of imitators who introjected the later work by Fritz and were not sufficiently knowledgeable or self-critical.
- e) He describes how “the here and now” which is usually referenced to Fritz Perls was in fact taken by Fritz from the psychoanalyst Otto Rank who believed that focussing on the present was crucially important. Otto Rank also suggested analysis of each aspect of a dream as a projection. (Despite Fritz announcing this idea as his own discovery) There follows an interesting discussion on dream work and how the client becomes each element / projection, the work is to assimilate them. Additionally, dreams can be thought of as retroflection, especially those prior to or following a therapy session which are reflections on the relationship between the client and therapist. An example is used of a client reporting a dream and describing an aspect of the dream as foolish – the therapist goes on to ask: In which way was I foolish in the last session?
- f) In the discussion Isadore says he rarely uses empty chair work as he prefers to keep in direct contact with the client who is invited to experience being the parts and to describe his feelings as he does so.
- g) He describes how understanding transference creates the ability to emphasise the here and now which makes psychotherapy possible. Making it possible to finish unfinished business from the past in the here and now. Everything the client experiences in the room, in the present with the therapist is significant and we also ask questions such as how I am like your mother / father.

- h) Fritz described maturity as transitioning from external / environmental support to self-support, however Isadore describes how difficult it is to understand health which is notoriously unpredictable as opposed to neurotic behaviour which is predictable.



Conversation with Erving and Miriam Polster: October 1978

- a) This conversation starts with stories of how they first became involved in the Gestalt training with Fritz, Laura, Isadora, Paul Goodman and Paul Weis... all interesting stuff, for example Erving describes his experience of Fritz as being both cutting and the most tender of all people, and how he loved this contrast and his vibrancy in life. Saying that “Fritz could assimilate the large story – making himself large and if the story were small he would stoop to hear it... he seemed a genius... a man who could cast spells”.
- b) Referring to Otto Rank’s concepts they describe the purpose of dream work: “To work with all the disowned parts of the self.”
- c) When asked what the differences are between the two of them Miriam describes how Erving is “crazier – when he is crazy someone has got to be not crazy”. She goes on to describe how he is very concrete – taking the simplicity of experience and making it obvious. He is a master at the free association leap to make connections with consistency. There is a kind of contagious excitement.
- d) Erving describes how Miriam stays with the client wherever they are going until there is that special moment of a beautiful experience. A person is less likely to be afraid with her than with me, a warmth, supportive and respect.
- e) There follows a discussion about the risk / danger of respectability for gestalt psychotherapy.



A conversation with Elliott Shapiro: June 1985

There is an interesting discussion on his life, relationships and experiences in the gestalt community, including describing the originators of Gestalt therapy as anarchists. He also discusses the significance of Laura Perls not taking charge of the Gestalt institute, while also criticizing Fritz for creating a travelling act and short films.

He quotes Paul Goodman who said at a memorial service for Fritz that he had taken Gestalt down the wrong road, and therefore it was becoming anti-intellectual. Goodman also gave credit to Laura for developing Gestalt concepts. The credit which had for a long time been denied her.



Notes taken from 3 books:

- **Fritz Perls** – Key figures in counselling and psychotherapy -- Petruska Clarkson and Jennifer Mackewan
- **Gestalt Counselling in Action** – Petruska Clarkson
- **Gestalt Therapy Verbatim** – F S Perls

Gestalt: A German word meaning completeness or whole. Gestalt therapy is part of the third wave psychotherapies as described by Maslow in 1968, meaning not Freudian nor behavioural in origin, the humanistic / existentialist tradition going back to Moreno and Drama therapy who was the first to put the patient in the centre of their own life dramas and was also the first to experiment with many of the active techniques used in both TA and Gestalt psychotherapy.

Gestalt Therapy was developed by both Fritz and Laura Perls who initially worked in South Africa. Fritz Perls wrote “Ego, Hunger and Aggression” published in 1949 and also Paul Goodman, Laura Perls and Fritz Perls wrote “Gestalt Therapy” in 1951. As with various famous therapists, Freud, Reich, Fritz and Laura escaped the Nazi Germany. As with Berne all the developers of Gestalt therapy were psychoanalysts and assumed initially that their readers and trainees would understand concepts such as transference. Gestalt took the ideas of Otto Rank with regard to dream work and working in the here and now, and also developed Reich’s insights into body armouring and combined them with Moreno’s ideas on drama therapy.

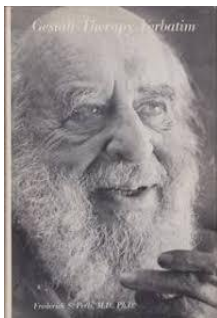
The Figure and ground: The basic need is to make wholes in order to make meanings.

You can only see one of the two images inside each of these drawings at once... you cannot see them both at once. Ground means the background and the figure is what we are aware of at the time. The experience of moving fluidly between figure and ground and making meanings can become interrupted through trauma which results in a fixated / fixed gestalt, or an unfinished gestalt... these can then create ongoing problems for people as they may become chronic or overwhelming and interfere with ongoing life and contact with the new now.



Gestalt therapy emphasises:

- **The central human activity is the need to give meaning.** To their perceptions, their experience and existence.
- **Every individual has only one inborn goal: to self-actualize.**
- **The here and now:** “Everything is to be done is to be done in the here and now, anything else is interfering”
- **Awareness of Experience:** The awareness continuum, discovering and becoming aware of each actual experience.
- **Awareness of polarities** – opposite ends of the same issue, such as love and hate.
- **Neurosis:** Is the difference between the verbalised concept of the self and the felt awareness of the self.

**Fritz Perls – in Gestalt Therapy Verbatim:**

Written towards the end of his life and when he was presenting himself on the stage – often looked at a kind of guru.

The five layers of neurosis

1. **The phoney Layer**, in which we play games, live out roles and try to be what we are not and, in the process, create voids and disown much of our selves. For example, Top dog / Bottom dog internal dialogue... in which one part of our selves attempts through harassment, lecturing, urging, threatening to force another part of our selves to behave in a different way, described as “good behaviour”.
2. **The second neurotic layer: the phobic layer;** this describes how when we become aware of phoney behaviours and manipulations we begin to get in touch with the fears that maintain them. We experience the desire to avoid new behaviour. “We are infantile because we are afraid to take responsibility in the now.
3. **The third layer is the impasse;** where we are caught not knowing what to do nor where to move. We experience the loss of environmental support but do not have the belief in our own resources.
4. **The fourth layer is implusive:** In this layer we become aware of how we have limited and constricted ourselves. We often feel grief, despair, and self-loathing.
5. **The fifth layer; the explosive layer:** This emerges as previously unused energies are released in an impactful way.

The neurotic is described by Perls as holding onto guilt and resentment towards his / her parents, who were not exactly who or what we needed and whom we can now continue to blame for our problems rather than become self-supporting.

Dream work is the royal road to integration: Dreams are ways to understand and integrate the parts of the self previously disowned. The person retells the dream in the here and now, being each part of the dream. Much of the book is taken up with first a detailed description of dream work followed by many transcripts of real therapy work by Fritz.

Quotes from Fritz Perls in Gestalt Therapy Verbatim:

1. We are entering the phase of the quacks and con men, who think if you get some break through you are cured. Disregarding any growth requirements and the real potential, the inborn genius in all of you.
2. A technique is a gimmick.... Jazzing up to at least know you are alive, this jazzing up is a dangerous substitute activity, another phoney therapy that prevents growth. We have turned from puritanism to hedonism, everything has to be fun, and any really being here is discouraged.
3. A thousand plastic flowers do not make the desert bloom. A thousand empty faces do not fill an empty room.
4. **On anxiety:** If you are going to make a change of course you are anxious and psychiatrists are normally afraid of anxiety... Anxiety is the Elan Vital which we carry with us.
5. **I am – I am what I am** – a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose: I cannot possibly be any different from what I am.
6. **The Gestalt Prayer:**

I do my thing, and you do your thing
I am not in this world to live up to your expectations
And you are not in this world to live up to mine.
You are you and I am I
If by chance we find each it is beautiful
If not – it can't be helped.

7. **Health:** the appropriate balance of the coordination of all that we are. In the world that we are – where ever we go we take the world with us. The “we” does not exist but consists of I and you.
8. **Polarities:** We can only see light because of non-light. Right does not exist without left. Freud only did half the job, he called the top dog the super-ego but left out the under dog which is just as much a personality as the top dog. The top dog is a bully and self-righteous, saying you should or should not, manipulating with demands and threats. The bottom dog manipulates by being defensive and apologetic.
9. **Nothing exists except the here and now** (Taken from Zen teachings). Whether you remember or anticipate you are doing it now.
10. **Memories** are not identical to what happened as they are an abstraction, you abstract the memory, the gestalt from the total context. You all know how much you are lying, deceiving yourselves, how much your memories are exaggerations, projections, patched up and distorted.
11. Psychoanalysis fosters infantile states by blaming the past and trauma. Freud devoted his whole life to proving sex is not bad.
12. **Why?** Every immature person asks why? In order to get a rationalization or explanation. Why and because are dirty words in Gestalt, and belong to the second class of verbiage: 3 levels of verbiage:
 - a. Good morning, how are you? = Chicken shit
 - b. Because, rationalisations and excuses = Bull shit
 - c. Why, theory discussions, philosophy and unending analysis of the cause of the cause of the cause = Elephant shit.

13. **Now and How** – the two legs on which Gestalt therapy walks. The now covers all that exists, the past is no more and the future is not yet. Now is experiencing, involvement, awareness. How is everything that is structure, what is going on – the process.
14. **Awareness:** The only basis of knowledge, communication, awareness of self, context and the other.
15. **The awareness exercise:** Talk to each other about how you are aware of – self – other – context.
16. **Guilt** – Projected resentment – find out what you resent, and the guilt will disappear – if you do not express your anger you become stuck in resentment. (Guilt = retroflected anger). Behind every resentment there is a demand – so you must express your anger and make a demand explicit. In the exercise on resentment the polarity is appreciate so you must also express your appreciation of the other.
17. **Resentment** is the most important expression of an impasse.
18. **Freud** (again) suffered from an immense number of phobias, he couldn't look at a patient, he couldn't face an encounter with a patient, and so Freud's phobias became the trademark couch of psychoanalysis.
19. **A good therapist** doesn't listen to the content of the bullshit the client produces, but to the sound, the music, verbal communication is usually a lie. The real communication is beyond words, listen to the voice, the movements, the posture, the sounds of the other person.
20. **A Gestalt therapist** uses eyes and ears, remains absolutely in the now. Avoids interpretations, verbiage (shit) production and all other kinds of mind fucking. Mind fucking is mind fucking, but it may also cover something else. Gestalt therapy is being in touch with the obvious.
21. **Responsibility = Response Ability** – the ability to respond, emotions, thinking, reactions. The ability to be I – oneself.
22. **Gestalt therapists do not analyse they integrate** the total existence of the person, an existential psychotherapy.
23. **Dreams:** The problems of existence are very clearly indicated in dreams: there follows many examples of dream work and detailed descriptions of how to do dream work .
 - a. “Freud once called the dream the royal road to the unconscious, and I believe it is the royal road to integration.”
 - b. Dreams are the most spontaneous production we have.
 - c. We do not analyse the dream we bring it back to life by re-living the dream as if it were happening now. Acting out the dream in the present so that it becomes a part of the self.

Gestalt Approaches:

- Gestalt is about re-establishment of healthy levels of growth, pleasure and contribution
- The therapist is to enter the relationship with the client in the now and to react to the now.
- The focus is on the experience, the what and how of the now.
- The therapist's most potent tool therefore is him / her self.
- The therapist does not interpret, rather invites the person into the moment to experience the i.e. awareness of the now.

Techniques

- The client is asked to imagine being another person.
- Acting out scenes in the here and now.
- Acting both sides of the internal dialogue.
- Putting their own body parts on the chair and giving the part a voice.
- Exaggeration of small body movements or inflections of the voice.
- Dream work.
- Empty chair work
- Attention to verbal content of the client's communication:
 - Using I rather than an impersonal "one" or "you" or "it".
 - Use of and rather than but.
 - Changing can't to won't. (I often ask what kind of can't it is.)
 - Changing "need" to "want"
 - Changing "have to" to "I am choosing to..." I think of this as becoming choice-full.

The Gestalt Cycle (Usually drawn as a circle)

- 1) **Sensation...** can be interrupted by desensitisation (minimising sensations)
- 2) **Awareness...** can be interrupted by deflection (avoiding sensation or meaningful impact)
- 3) **Mobilisation...** can be interrupted by introjections (Internalised shoulds)
- 4) **Action...** Can be interrupted by projection (Seeing in others what I don't see in myself)
- 5) **Final Contact...** Can be interrupted by retroflexion (Doing to myself rather than to the other)
- 6) **Satisfaction...** Can be interrupted by egotism (controlling self... stepping outside self and watching)
- 7) **Withdrawal...** Can be interrupted by confluence (Enmeshment with... non-differentiation)