

Although nothing predictable happened, my life turned upside down in the wake of that group. I can't trace back the connections along the synapses and say it was because I realised this, or understood that, or broke free of the other. The dynamics were magical, and I honestly don't know where the group was influential and where it was accidental. It doesn't matter. I wouldn't dream of recommending a group to anyone on the

strength of that or any other group. It can stand as just a peculiar, insistent, isolated instance of something real happening. And it is real things I'm looking for. If this account sounds fragmentary - you're right, it is. In the end resort, encounter groups notwithstanding, my life runs like a river, secretly. I couldn't tell you if I tried, and maybe it's the same for you.

GESTALT THERAPY

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An objective view of humanity today reveals that not many of us know how to live properly. Many people cannot cope efficiently with their problems and their environment. Few people enjoy to the full the actual experience of being and living.

F.M.Alexander suggested that it is because we still rely on our unconscious responses to our environment. In a simple situation of hunting, food-gathering, mating and self-protection this was very efficient. But now, with our imperfect and mistreated bodies and increasingly more complicated society, these responses are often self-defeating and damaging to the organism.

Building on Alexander's basic insight, Dr.Frederick Perls has evolved a philosophy/technique for living that he has called gestalt therapy. He first stated it in 'Ego, Hunger and Aggression' and then published a further work called 'Gestalt Therapy'. Gestalt Psychology has been concerned with emphasising the importance of perception of the whole rather than of the separate parts. One's perception of a cow for example is quite diffe-

rent if one sees it in a field, in a market or loose in a town street. And yet it is the same cow. It is the background that has changed. It is the total picture - cow/background that is meaningful and which is perceived, experienced and responded to. Gestalt Therapy applies this idea to the human organism. The sense of identity, 'I', 'ego feeling', is a total whole comprising figure and background. And this figure/background description is constantly changing. If you have toothache this sensation is the main figure and breathing, temperature, body position, are all backgrounds to it. If you have no toothache or other obtrusive body aches and you are walking by the sea, your breathing itself could be the foreground in your total gestalt against a background of sky, body movement and sea-gulls crying.

This sense of identity, 'I' feeling, is more real and vivid if one has a conscious lively contact with one's environment. If one hears music right in the foreground of one's attention and with full concentration. If one concentrates on the flavour and textures of the food in one's mouth right up to the point of complete

liquefaction and swallowing. If one feels one's own body in a clear responsive way. If one really feels one's arm lying on the chair-arm. Really feel the air going into one's nose, and down one's throat and into one's lungs. Feel one's feet contacting the ground and bearing the live weight of one's own body.

This is the basic philosophy. Its use in therapy depends on making the individual more aware of his body and and more aware of the muscle tensions and twists that he has developed unconsciously in avoiding old problems and anxieties and painful experiences.

By really concentrating on internal aches and pains, one may be able to reproduce the emotional problems that originally caused them. If one has repressed the wish to cry, shout out or scream, this may show as a tightening of the chest and an inability to breathe deeply. It is possible by concentrating on the symptoms here and now to bring to light the buried emotions - and then try to express them and destroy the tensions and assimilate the residue into one's experience.

In fact, Perls suggests that a great amount of bad posture, incorrect breathing, fibrositis and backache is due to the suppression of the wish to cry, shout out or scream. One of the most damaging things to say to a child is that it must control itself. 'You're a big boy now'. 'Pull yourself together' will always do more harm than good.

One's sense of 'I' - ego feeling - sense of one's own identity is the greater, the more aware one is of contact with the immediate environment - air, clothes, other people, food.

And particularly food which, in the Gestalt way of life is considered very important. Freud held that most neuroses

and problems were due to misdirected sex instinct. Perls suggests that more problems are caused by misusing the instinct to eat.

The instinct for eating is a major biological drive, just as important as the sex drive, and because of this must be treated seriously.

There are three ways of taking food - and they correspond to the infants three stages of sucking, biting and chewing. In terms of adult eating habits, the first - sucking - is a kind of semi-conscious absorption; the alcoholic who scarcely notices what he is drinking, and the gulping feeder whose concentration is on book or television. The second stage, the biting stage, corresponds to the infant who will use his incisors to tear off lumps of food but will then swallow them down with a minimum of time spent on mastication. Only the fully developed eater like the child with a full set of teeth will bite off cleanly and masticate fully, being aware of the range of flavours and textures in his mouth before swallowing.

And these three ways of dealing with food are often paralleled in the way a person deals with information, and with life. The sucking type will only read headlines; will hang on to an idea blindly without reasoning or consideration. The gulper will read easy non-demanding material and will swallow it without assimilating it. The mature individual will tackle difficult reading material, will break it down, understand it and assimilate it. He will also be prepared to get to grips with a situation or problem - break it up into its components, deal with it, and thus destroy it.

Aggression comes into this - and Perls suggests that aggression is in fact a good and necessary instinct so long as it is used in the right way. The first thing a baby can aggress with is its incisor teeth. For

the first time it has something to attack the outside world with. Now it can attack its food and tear off lumps - a good creative use of its aggressive urges. But it is limited in the kind of food that its body can assimilate in lumps. The next stage is when the molars begin to grow; now it can really deal with its food. It can aggressively bite off lumps, grind the food up and destroy it, then swallow it and assimilate it.

Similarly an aggressive attitude to a life situation can be healthy and creative - more so than just hanging on blindly and unaware.

What we are doing is taking something from our environment and making it a part of us. We do the same thing with learning and information. The better we do both of these the fuller our spectrum of sensation becomes, and the more effective we become in dealing with our environment. And by fully experiencing contact with the environment, one can feel fully responsible for oneself and can accept the idea that everything that happens within one's organism is potentially within one's own control.

However many friends, acquaintances, relatives you have, all you can really count on and know is yourself. And you have to answer to yourself and for yourself; and this includes your whole self body, mind, soul.

If you have a headache, you are giving it to yourself. If you read something with a flash of insight - you experience and know something within yourself. If someone makes you unhappy - you, and only you are experiencing that feeling.

This denies any suggestions that other people are to blame - or that they are to be praised - for one's own feelings. If one accepts that the 'here and now' is the only reality, then it must follow that at this 'now' moment one is fully

responsible for what one is doing, what one is feeling and what one is - within the framework of immediate constraints. A prisoner may not be responsible for being locked in but he is responsible for the way he feels about it.

To accept this idea means that one need no longer waste emotional energy in repining or blaming oneself for past failures, or in blaming other people for what they have done or not done. I am here and now responsible for myself, and can choose what to do about myself and how to feel about myself.

This does not imply that I am all powerful; my decisions and actions may not be within the framework of what is possible. I cannot choose to be Prime Minister. I can choose to spend my time studying politics with the intention of trying to be Prime Minister. I cannot choose to be an Olympic athlete if I am over thirty and undersized. But within the biological limits of my own body I am responsible for its being healthy or unhealthy, fat or thin, happy or unhappy.

This is the essence of 'gestalt therapy', and in his book Perls gives a series of routines for developing the kinds of awareness that he is suggesting. At Esalen he developed the same ideas in connection with a form of group therapy. This form of personality analysis has become very popular and has, to a large extent, taken over the name 'gestalt'.

Used in this sense, a 'gestalt' group comprises a series of leader/subject encounters in a group setting, with the subject's experiencing his immediate experiences and body sensations.

Whether used in group experience or as an individual technique, the essence of Gestalt therapy is the importance of the here and now, of the individual's awareness of and contact with the environment and his/her inner processes.