

Ursula Fausset

The Gestalt Process of Education

Gestalt has now become the third most common psycho-therapeutic affiliation in America. It also, I believe, exemplifies the essential philosophy behind all Encounter groups. It can be called a therapy or a learning process and by its' nature must be a way of living and relating.

The word Gestalt has no equivalent in English but means a unified whole, a meaningfully organised whole. The 'whole' consists of figure and ground; when these are in relationship there is integrated and positive flow. When the formation is disturbed, dis-ease results. To complete the gestalt we begin working with the obvious, the figure. The image suggested is a revolving floating rubber ball (rather than the usual layers of an onion) and we work with the part which is visible above the water, the most easily available. The invisible part has the function of support. All our behaviour patterns, everything in our background that we take for granted and rely upon, acts as a support for our present experience. Change takes place when we realize that we no longer need an aspect of this support, that it has become a block, instead of a part which enables us to experience more fully.

As with most of the New Therapies, analysis and interpretation are avoided. The person is invited to focus on their own here and now experience in a continuum of awareness. Moreover, in Gestalt the *content* of the subjects message (story or presenting problem) is subsidiary to the *process*. Body language and voice are brought into awareness to offer a new non-cerebral truth.

So the work is through sensory awareness, emotional closeness, personal responsibility and spontaneity. Keeping with, repeating and exaggerating what is happening in the moment (for example a gesture, confusion, boredom, a physical tension) is basic practice. By going into the blocks and frustrations, a person becomes more expressive and experiences the enhancement which follows. Neurosis is built on avoidance, and so we work with the avoidance.

The philosophy behind Gestalt is existential and largely to do with differentiation and integration. Differentiation alone leads to polarities, which will cause fighting and paralysis. These polarities are demonstrated by 'cushion-hopping'. In a specifically Gestalt group there may be a special chair, which people can sit in; showing their intention to 'work'. At least one other chair will be available for the worker to sit in and speak for another aspect of their conflict. Usually the work is with one person, the group being used when appropriate, eg: for feedback. While someone is working, the only active involvement which some leaders allow other members is that of playing the role of alter-ego, a psycho-dramatic method. I prefer the more flexible use of cushions, where, as with the chairs, they may represent different parts of a person or parts projected into the outside world. By keeping in the now, projections will be re-owned. The dialogue, classically between Top Dog (the 'should' side) and Under Dog (the 'can't side) makes the conflict more explicit.

We owe a lot of the norms in an Esalen type Encounter to the Gestalt valuation of awareness. The type of feedback, the literal way in which we work with dreams and, above all, the constant return to present feelings.

Each leader has her/his own style, and many incorporate other disciplines. Examples are bio-energetics and the guided fantasy, which work well with Gestalt. Some Transactional Analysts have adopted Gestalt methods to bring life to their theories. Gestalt can be made into a hard dry discipline; also I have attended Gestalt workshops in which the facilitator used very little structure and these have been the most positive and nurturing experiences.

A whole workshop or a whole therapy can be given through Gestalt Art. I like to use this method during a weekend workshop. My favourite symbol is the tree, which I make about every six months and which I regard as an indicator of my own growth and needs. In the tree exercise (and most gestalt art is used in a similar way) people first 'make a tree' (that is my only 'direction') on a large sheet of paper and then they describe their tree in the first person present. Almost any drawing can be used, but I find the tree an especially complete vehicle for projections. It can so simply give a person profound insight, without the intervention of any 'helper'.

There are a number of popular remarks in Growth groups which spring from Gestalt, a few of which I will expand upon.

'I am not here to live up to your expectations'. Doing so is a common behaviour pattern in those who have a need to be liked which overshadows the need to be real. If we are confident about our worth and know what we want, we grow beyond living up to others' expectations and no longer have to act a role. We do not have to mask our authenticity by being dependent upon others' approval. Following this theme 'Maturity is moving from environmental support to self-support'. The point of impasse comes in therapy when the person is reluctant to take that step towards self-support.

'You cannot change yourself, only real-ize who you are'. 'Lose your mind and come to your senses'. and 'Don't push the river' all emphasise *Being* awareness in the now as a sensual creature. We expend a lot of energy trying to change things, ourselves, even other people. Here is a cleverism: - 'People who try are trying'. The river image is particularly meaningful to me (and was made so by Barry Stevens' book 'Don't Push the River'). It expresses a faith in the flow of life, an acceptance that what *Is* is the only reality.

THE GESTALT CENTRE

We now have a Gestalt Centre in Britain. It consists of an address in S.W. London and of the people who have agreed to share and be energised by this Western path to maturity and wisdom.

Larry Bloomberg, who started work twenty years ago with Fritz' and Laura Perls

(founders of the present movement) and who has helped establish three Gestalt Institutes in the States, has just begun a uniquely flexible training programme.

For 24 people the work started with two weeks in a country 'Grand Hostel' early in August. Besides the specific Gestalt learning, by individuals or in groups, experiments in living were an important part of the experience. It was previously stated that no drugs were to be used; neither tea, coffee, sugar, nor prescribed chemicals. The majority appreciated this discipline and a least three people addicted to nicotine were promisingly free of the weed.

To further experiment with a variety of states of consciousness, the course began with 6 days on a fruit diet. Crates of delicious avacadoes, peaches and mangoes, as well as the seasonal fruits, gave pleasure to this period. These days were followed by 3 more difficult ones, this time on a complete fast. During the whole 2 weeks, fresh spring water was obtained from a nearby village.

Polarities of human contact were emphasised during the first week. For 3 days and nights half the group were in total individual isolation; people removed all external stimuli, such as interesting surroundings (windows, decorations) and books. Also, many experimented with extremes within their isolation period, breaking habits as they affect sleeping, masturbating, wearing clothes, dark and light and so on. Each person had a shit-mate, who was responsible for emptying the waste bucket and replenishing the fruit bowl, when placed outside the door. While these 12 were in isolation, the other 12 were in continuous contact (marathon) and then they swapped situations. The isolation led to meaningful discoveries for many. Re-entry ceremonies, with candles, garlands of wild flowers and chanting, brought good, peaceful loving feelings.

Larry Bloomberg was the central facilitator during this workshop and was a living example of his Gestalt philosophy and life style. Participants were continually having to discover their own needs and take responsibility for themselves out of boredom, frustration or chaos. This was most apparent in the kitchen! There was another big room where the whole party could meet, but much of the Gestalt learning took place on beds, in the garden, in the communal bathroom-toilet, or around the dining table. Other people used their leadership skills, both when Larry wasn't present (eg: in the women's groups) and increasingly when the freedom to do so became apparent in the general meetings. People could be in full appreciation of his skills and at the same time be continually encouraged to develop their own support. The type of dependency which is kindled by the Growth Movement Guru, was affectively lacking. The group was largely self-directed and attention was inevitably drawn to the social and political implications of the work.

After lengthy consultations, about one-third of the people from the Grand Hostel decided to embark on the Gestalt Centres training programme. This meant for many from 150 to 300 hours of involvement during the year, at a cost of £350. Each person would have a schedule of courses and fees to meet their personal needs. The Growth Centres are now collaborating with the Gestalt Centre to make available a variety of leaders to assist in training. The more experienced trainees are scheduled to assist in

public workshops in Denmark, the Netherlands and Italy and are being taught how to design and administer their own workshops.

Gestalt can be understood easily when regarded as an educational scheme. The Gestalt trainer frustrates awkward and dull styles of behaviour or consciousness. He observes the wisdom of his or her trainees, encourages this wisdom to flow gracefully and clearly, and accepts and delights in the discovery of this treasure sleeping ignored within them.

The elements of the Gestalt educational scheme remain hidden by appearing obvious, which make them difficult to discover by independent investigation.

Larry Isaac Bloomberg

For Humanistic Psychology - a reply

Barbara Moore

Barry Richards presented his case 'against' in the August issue of 'Self and Society'; (*Against Humanistic Psychology*) he made a stern appeal for political and social commitment rather than the self-centred introversion of which he accuses Encounter. Apparently we are all sitting contemplating our psyches, instead of working for the revolution (an external one, of course).

It is not so long that the Russian Revolution was followed by Stalin's rise to power; this showed all too clearly what can happen to a Left-wing political revolution. There was little to choose between the excesses of Stalin and those of Hitler. People are only too willing to abnegate responsibility for themselves, and to follow, even to their own destruction, some powerful, authoritarian Father-figure, subjugating self to an ideal-the Fatherland, the State. If Stalin and Hitler are too remote, we need only look at the near-deification of Chairman Mao, with the Little Red Book taking the place of Holy writ.

I would argue, along with Reich, that a political revolution is foredoomed without a social and personal revolution, and I will return to this point.

However, I must agree with Barry Richards when he says that Encounter is largely a middle-class occupation for those with spare time and money. I don't see anything here like Reich's free Vienna clinic, where people in thousands came to ask advice on social and sexual problems. All the same, I don't think it's quite fair to assume, as Barry Richards seems to in his rather disparaging reference to them, that the academics, social workers, clerics and so on who go to Encounter groups are *not* socially committed. They may well be as committed as Barry Richards himself. Many