

The Velvet Steamroller

Gestalt Therapy Through Validational Re-Framing:

Awareness heals. To the extent I am aware of my process as it happens, things will go as well as they can go. This does not guarantee happiness, but it paves the way for as much good feelings as it possible for me, in-this-situation. From this position, with which most Gestaltists would agree, it is not much of a step to see that if some awareness is good, more (i.e., deeper, fuller, more extensive, expanded) awareness would be better. And so, most of the technology of Gestalt is focused on just that; expanding awareness. The direction of this expansion, metaphorically, is usually onward to somehow the "next" awareness, the next step.

There is a dangerous side-effect of this thrust for more awareness, especially for members of our achievement-oriented culture. "Getting" the "next" awareness, instead of just letting the flow of awareness happen, become first a goal, then an expectation, then a standard, and for some an obsession. Comparison begins. This awareness isn't as good as (1) the last one I got (2) the one Joe just got (3) it should have been. Evaluation follows. Maybe this (partner) (group) (leader) (form of therapy) isn't really right for me. Maybe - Heaven forbid - I'm not all right, since the awareness I'm getting is substandard. The tone of a group or session in which this process happens becomes increasingly heavy and energy is increasingly dissipated.

Anyone who has been around Gestalt very much will remember times when the above kind of process was present, in him and/or others. It is truly a side-effect, not a necessary or inevitable process, yet in our culture it happens all too often. Essentially, at those moments, we have fallen into the sin of gluttony; grasping ahead to the next bite instead of chewing and savoring the one we have already taken in.

The crucial problem with awareness gluttony is that as attention shifts to reaching for the next one, it is taken for the full use and appreciation of the awareness that is already there. The full healing value of present awareness isn't received in the hasty rush for the next one. Now at any given moment, the awareness already there is quite a bit, and one more step is not going to add a significant amount. Working from this realization, we have been experimenting with a different direction in the expansion of awareness: fuller appreciation of what is there rather than reaching for more. Metaphorically, we think of this as expanding awareness upward rather than onward-forward. In these interventions, the client is never surprised by any content of awareness, only the new twist in perspective and significance of what he has just said. A sample opening interview might illustrate this best.

Client: "I drink too much, and can't seem to stop."

Therapist: "Good! Rather than being unconscious about your drinking, where a lot of drinkers remain all their lives, you are clearly aware of the problem. Not only that, you've already tried some active steps to stop, rather than just be idly aware."

CL: "Nothing I've tried has worked yet."

TH: "and you haven't let some temporary failures shake you from your keen awareness of the problem."

CL: "I'm about ready to give up."

TH: "You're even willing to experience your despair, while hanging in there."

CL: "But it's destroying my family too!"

TH: "So, it's not just concern for yourself that motivates you, but concern for your family too!"

CL: "The way I act, it sometimes doesn't look like I love them."

TH: "Even with your concern, you are willing to consider the evidence that you may not love them."

The essence of these interventions is reframing. No new knowledge is added; only a different perspective from which the acknowledged state of the client suddenly looks positive instead of negative. In the first statement the client acknowledges being in a set or class of people who drink too much. Then, implicitly, he compares that set to a larger set of people who do not drink too much. In that comparison, of course, he looks pretty bad, and his bad feeling is expressed in his voice tone, depressed manner, etc. The therapist accepts the statement of fact (drink too much) as is, then notes that in the large set of people who drink too much, there are two subsets. The larger, less healthy, subset contains those who drink too much and do not acknowledge this; the smaller, closest-to-health subset contains those who drink too much and acknowledge this excess. In that implied comparison, of course, the client looks pretty good, even to himself. It is not that he needed the validation of the therapist; as soon as the new frame is presented, he can see that it already existed latently in his universe, and he can provide his own validation. He only needed to be reminded of the possibility of that point of view. Thus the emphasis on reframing as the essential act, rather than the validation, which was only a dramatic way to suggest the new frame.

"Our ground of being in these interventions is that the client already has in awareness all that he needs."

The only problem is that he is persisting in a narrow and negative point of view about what he knows, and we deal with that problem by providing a frame, which we know already exists in his set of available frames, in which what he is doing suddenly looks O.K. He doesn't have to bite off anything new; just chew and digest what he already has. Consistent with this ground

of being is the fact that in these interventions the client is never left with anything he is supposed to do; no questions to answer, dialogues to engage in, or exercises to perform. He is full and complete just as he is; we only want to give him the space to savor and appreciate the fullness more. Of course, in the silence that follows the intervention something will come up; perhaps an objection to the positive reframing (which will itself be reframed to show its perfection) or a new step in awareness, which, coming from him will be the optimum, best fitting one, uncontaminated by the therapist's considerations. When a cycle of these interventions has been completed, what follows the last silence is usually a burst of good feeling from the client, that can be felt all over the room, and the client will acknowledge almost with surprise suddenly feeling O.K., even though nothing much has "happened" with regard to the presenting complaint. (Usually, on investigation, a lot has happened, though not in any way he expected.)

Frequently, as this validation process goes on, people suddenly experience how committed they are to negative evaluations, and this realization may replace the original content as centre of focus. It is fascinating to watch the twists and turns some people will go through to maintain a negative image, which is impossible in the face of this intervention style. It was one of these clients who, when her persistent negativity finally collapsed, name this process the "Velvet Steamroller".

The velvet steamroller is new to us, and we don't really know all of its fine points, or its possible range of usefulness. It is clearly valuable with "experienced" clients, especially those who have slipped into awareness gluttony or persistently negative self images. Particularly, we have found it useful as a discipline to put ourselves through. As we sit and concentrate on making only interventions that celebrate the positive and leave the client nothing to do, we can hear very clearly our own internal evaluative chatter, negativity, and desire to make "clever" interventions, and this style of work provides an excellent opportunity to let those tendencies pass away.

It is also too soon to see fully how this validation process will combine with more classical active gestalt interventions. The shift in mood between the peaceful, undemanding reframing process and the more agitated "doing" quality of classical gestalt interventions has seemed jarring at times, and so far, the two ways of working seem to be best combined in larger segments, using one consistently for a while, then the other. For training purposes, the consistent use of one at a time seems definitely superior. Above and beyond the effects of specific interventions the tone of validation has a dramatic effect on people, and we find this tone influencing our work in therapy and training, even when we are using or teaching different methods.
