
GELSTALT BY YOURSELVES

by

Gaie Houston

Yes, you may go a good way on your journey using gestalt by yourself. **But.** Never do alone what you can do with a friend. This is the slogan that comes to me, the moment I have written the title suggested by the editor.

So I take 'by yourself' not only to mean alone, but also to signify 'without a professional'. One way of using gestalt by yourself is with dreams. You wake remembering a dream or dream fragment, and have a little time before you need get up. Let the dream through your mind again, noticing what feelings you have, or what associations you make with themes in waking life. For example, you may wake with a beating heart and a dream image of running for a train. If you remember that you do have to be at the railway station in half an hour, then you will probably do better to leap from your bed with a wild cry, than to lie there brooding on all that a train might symbolise to you.

But dreams are not commonly as transparent as this. You are more likely to recall some apparently odd images or scenes. I and many people who have reported to me, have gained insight from playing a gestalt

game with these. For newcomers to gestalt, I can explain briefly. The game consists simply of focusing on a scene or image from your dream, and then describing yourself as it. As an example, I quote from the dream work of someone I was with recently, in whose dream a green bubble floated through the air. Pretending to be the bubble, she said, 'I'm pretty safe up here, just floating. I can't really see the people very clearly. I'm dreamy, sort of smug. Only there's a feeling I could burst, so I need to float up higher'. Up higher, she felt more anxious, and finally decided to come down to earth.

Just this image seemed to her a sufficient warning statement about her tendency in waking life to float off rather than make contact with people or confront.

By experimenting, being different images or scenes, you may enlighten yourself a little too. The assumption in gestalt dreamwork is that each element in the dream is a poetic statement of an aspect of yourself. So you may trust the perhaps surprising descriptions you make of yourself as a tree or a hobgoblin or whatever, and notice the overlap with your waking self.

Most of the work of gestalt therapy is to do with raising awareness. Being the only species we know of with such heightened consciousness and intelligence, we need to use some of our energy to tune out or tune down much of the vast mass of data coming at us. Whether from this or other causes, we seem often to reduce our pick-up range, and our responses, to what I see as a dangerous narrowness. One person may unconsciously pre-select her own responses like this, for example.

Daddy looks after me. Daddy is a man. Men are daddies who will always take care of me.

Someone with painfully opposite early experiences may on the other hand reach this generalised conclusion. Daddy is cruel. He is in authority over me. Authority figures are cruel and must be fought at all times.

I have quoted what seem simplistic, but are very common emotional attitudes, whose social consequences are dire. In gestalt there are many games which give the player a chance to experiment with different perceptions from usual. They create a kind of gymnasium of the imagination. These games finally have to happen inside you alone, so I talk of them here. Many of them are to do with allowing yourself the opposite view from usual.

For example, just now, give yourself 30 seconds or so to imagine EVERYTHING round you opposite

from how it is. There is no need to be academic about what is Opposite. Just imagine, say, you very tiny, the ladybird six feet high, the chair singing songs, and on, and on. Your crossness at such a suggestion may be a measure of the rigidity of your perception.

In a more focused way, you may find out more about yourself by becoming, for a few minutes in imagination, someone you have very strong feelings about. Try these questions on yourself after the experiment. Do I squash or refuse to recognise in myself the qualities I so value in that other? Or. What have those qualities and behaviours that so upset me to do with what I do, would like to do, or even need to do?

Another area of work in gestalt is in making contact, in meeting people and the rest of the world outside yourself, with clear awareness. Most of us, some of the time, are out of clear contact, and instead in its opposite, confluence, which is a state of mild or more severe muddle about what is us, and what is other. There are many ways of experimenting, without professional help, at making contact more vivid. Try listening to a favourite orchestral tape, focusing on one instrument throughout. Play it again, focusing on another sound within it. You are likely again to be able to find your own guidelines for raising your awareness of other people. They may include looking at the other person more; meeting their eyes at times; actually listening to all they say before

starting to invent your response, rather than just finding the words you think will suit the other person; saying clear noes and yesses, so that you are aware of what you are rejecting and what you want to take on board; acknowledging the feelings you have towards the other.

Living fully is to a great extent to do with being freely yourself when you are with other people. Some of the skills of doing this can be learned in groups or therapy. But the day to day work must always be, as the title of this piece suggests, gestalt on your own.

Gaie Houston has written a guide to running gestalt self-help groups, **The Red Book of Gestalt**. From bookshops, or £2,90 by post from her at: 9 Rochester Terrace, London NW1 9JN. The Red Book of Groups is also on sale, at the same price.

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on Thursday 23rd January 1986 from 7.30 for 8.00pm
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led by **Dr Malcolm Parlett**, on the subject of:
GESTALT: SURVIVING ITS IMITATORS

Malcolm Parlett says: The title gives a strong hint about the lecture's theme. Personally, I prefer Gestalt fresh and newly dug up: more often it is pre-packaged, deep frozen, diluted, or with various additives. Properly experienced, the Gestalt approach is potent, alive, challenging, graceful, intelligent – and always new. Its message is that we imitate, package up, and standardise at our peril. We shall seek to touch the heart of the approach (as much poetry as cardiology, this!); slough off stereotypes and slogans; and hopefully enjoy the exploration – to the limit of words and perhaps a little further.

I have recently moved my psychotherapy practice, residence, and personal research from London to Bristol. I am a graduate of the Gestalt Institute, Cleveland, USA. I teach in the Gestalt Centre, London. My Gestalt interests are in training and writing; the interplay of theory and practising; and in the international growth of Gestalt as an approach to therapy and living, as well as a general model for intervening in systems. I am also a visiting professor in the Institute of Educational Technology, the Open University, and an organisational consultant in private practice.

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