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## THE GESTALT APPROACH TO THE NOT HERE-AND-NOW

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by

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Two nights ago, I dreamt that I mistakenly got off the train and thinking I needed to get back to the previous station in order to continue my journey, searched desperately for a tube map. I didn't know where I was, or what the name of the previous station was, and felt a deep confusion and frustration as the map kept eluding me.

When I woke, I explored the dream in a Gestalt way by 'becoming' various parts of the dream. The map told me that it was eluding me because I didn't need it - I could trust my deeper self to know the way. The train told me that I had bought a ticket and knew where I was going; it was not necessary to get off and return to a previous station and I should relax and trust the train. In my imagination, I now returned to the train, and discovered I knew my destination - I was to represent the universe in a conference between the universe and the nations. I didn't need to find an official map to know where I was and where I was coming from - I had rather to use my energy to prepare myself for the tasks ahead.

Yesterday sitting in the train from Waterloo and pondering this dream, a woman came up to me and said she was on the wrong train and could I help her? I suggested that she get off at Wimbledon. "But I don't have my tube map and I don't know where I am." she told me in a confused fashion. It transpired that she thought she had to go back to the previous station, Waterloo, and vaguely thought she needed to get there by tube. I was able to tell her confidently that she didn't need a tube map, and didn't need to return to the previous station, because she would find that her train stopped at Wimbledon.

The Gestalt method that I utilised to work on the dream - taking the "I" position to understand any symbol or person in one's life - has probably contributed more to my life and work than any other single technique. The related Gestalt emphasis on owning our projections and taking full responsibility for our lives has been a powerful starting point in my struggle to understand what it means to take responsibility, and who is the 'I' who is responsible - to grasp, for

example, how the woman on the train, who was not a hallucination, was related to my own unconscious. I do not consider myself a 'Gestalt Therapist', and I admit that I do not find the Gestalt theory of personality or of therapy any more interesting than dozens of other theories, but I consider that this technique, and the Gestalt approach to life, are not only not antithetical to exploring and valuing the unconscious, but are, rather, a crucial tool in that process.

In Gestalt therapy one might find oneself having a conversation between one's right and left hand, or between the train and train track of a dream, or oneself and one's dead mother. At the simplest level, if you want to understand something, you talk to it, switch roles, 'become' it, and respond. Sufi leader Pir Vilayat Khan said once that the self is like a building - you can never see it from all perspectives at once. This Gestalt technique enables one to shift from perspective to perspective and in so doing approach closer to the whole truth of the situation, a truth you must know on one level, and yet be unable to reach when you are stuck in your own perspective.

Anyone who has done any Gestalt work has been amazed how, by shifting seats, one can gain access to a way of looking at the world, or even concrete information that seems totally new. I'll never forget the group member who complained about how she could never remember appointments, which made her boyfriend angry

since he always did. For example she had no idea what time she was to meet him tomorrow. "Ask him," I said; so she imagined him on an empty chair, asked him and switched roles. "Four o'clock," she said promptly, the minute she sat down in his seat.

It would seem that our everyday reliance on verbal language, whose special excellence is in rational, conscious expression, along with our habit of confining ourselves to the perspective of 'being me'. or rather 'me in this particular position', leads to a kind of channelling of information, so that we simply cannot reach the other aspects of ourselves. It is rather like having a filing cabinet full of information and having access only to two or three files. Each image, each new perspective, opens up access to a new file. It was not 'Top Secret', not censored or repressed, but was nevertheless hidden from us.

Going deeply into an image or a role, and particularly doing so from a variety of perspectives by switching roles and saying 'I am' about each one, seems also to enable us to take a moment in time, and go deep down into it, around, and through it, until one finds the centre, a centre that probably includes assumptions that began early in childhood. Again these assumptions are not so much repressed as implicit, unarticulated, and therefore unavailable to examination. By giving them a language, and a spokes-person, we allow them to emerge. In Gestalt work this is

often done through a dialectical process in which two polarities are explored. Sometimes one finds the childhood self and the childhood reason one made these assumptions, and must work through the childhood drama. Work on 'unfinished business' or with the 'child in me' or on 'saying goodbye' often elicits, and helps people work through, traumatic old material. At other times, simply uncovering background assumptions that are patently outdated, irrelevant, or dangerous, enables us to make some new choices. My work on the dream quoted above, by clarifying the assumptions which were causing me difficulty in my life, also freed me to connect myself with deep life purposes that had been hidden from me.

I believe that, besides tapping aspects of our full potential that we are not normally conscious of, using imagery in this way can help us to gain access to our collective unconscious, or to put it another way, to reach out to that which is beyond our personal self. I remember for example the moment when I learned that Frank Lake had died, and had to deal with my disappointment at never being able to do rebirthing work with him. What I did then, in a kind of Gestalt way, was talk to him, and ask him to help me to do what I could no longer ask him to do in person. I went through a powerful experience of regressing to the moment of conception and experiencing that moment as a blinding light and as a kind of whole-worldness in which I was the world. I have never before, or

since, had such a powerful experience of conception. While there are many ways of explaining this (e.g. my determination not to feel disappointed or angry at myself) I cannot help feeling that I managed to put myself in Frank Lake's hands in a way that went beyond simply a psychological belief. Whether I am right or not, this Gestalt tool certainly enabled me to go further back into the past and through that take into the transpersonal more than I could have done using my own conscious resources.

In its implicit approach to symbols, this technique is closer to Jung than to Freud. While the Freudian approach to symbols leads you to free associate using that symbol as a starting point, Jung is concerned with focusing on the essence of that symbol itself on all possible levels. Thus in a Freudian analysis you would try to find out what the table in your dream reminds you of, while in a Jungian analysis you are more likely to focus deeply on the table itself, with its particular material, particular shape, particular essence, until you understand the table fully as a personal and archetypal symbol. Identifying with the table by saying 'I am the table' is probably the easiest and most straightforward way to begin. The difference in approach between Jung and Perls then becomes important, for while Perls would assume that the table is a symbol for an aspect of the personality, Jung would view the symbol as possibly having a much more far-reaching archetypal significance. In my view, it is limiting and even dangerous to see

everything as an aspect of the personal self. But the method works beautifully whichever approach you take.

How does this technique relate to the unconscious or the past? Does it, for example, ignore the importance of a repressed unconscious and of deeply buried memories and thus remain ultimately superficial? Or does it in fact create a powerful mode of access to the unconscious and to one's history?

First and foremost, this technique allows us to demystify the unconscious. The psychoanalytic point of view, and in fact most therapeutic approaches, require another to view you from the outside and to see what you cannot see. The Gestalt method, while incorporating a role for the therapist, does invite you to sit in an empty chair 'opposite yourself' and see, sense, or otherwise discover what is normally hidden from you. In so doing, you are enabled to reveal yourself to yourself.

Furthermore, at one and the same time that you say 'I' about that point of view that you were hitherto not conscious of, you are, in an immediate sense, taking responsibility for your unconscious. You are including yourself in it, or it in you, in a way that eventually forces you to say 'I' or sometimes 'we' about aspects of your self that you would normally refuse to own.

The attitude to life of Gestalt therapy is implicit here. The

Gestalt therapist encourages (and sometimes exhorts) us to take responsibility for ourselves on a deep level, to own our own disowned aspects, which include our symptoms, to take back our projections from other people, and in so doing stop living up to the expectations of others, and to begin to make authentic choices. Unfortunately, all this can be done in a superficial way, by changing language from 'I can't' to 'I won't' but not meaning it, by stepping on other people or simply rationalising lack of loving on the pretext that one is being authentic. Indeed, some Gestalt therapists have the reputation of emphasising aggressive confrontation, almost blaming, on the grounds that one is responsible for oneself and therefore should be making a better choice.

I think this is most likely to happen when one doesn't have respect for that which goes beyond the rational, conscious, and personal self, and takes responsibility only for those bits that one has, so to speak, made Gestalt incursions into. To begin to recognise fully that the 'I' that is responsible includes my 'greater self' - the unconscious me, the 'superconscious' me, even perhaps the universe - is a profound understanding. Rather than thinking of the unconscious as part of me, I prefer to think of my conscious self as part of a greater whole whose purposes are not always obvious to me, and whose laws I am struggling to understand. Thus when I 'take responsibility' I am emphatically **not** blaming, for blaming is a splitting process

whereby the 'good' conscious part of me blames the rest of me. Rather, I am trying to look at what is and own that 'I' chose it, and it chose me, and we will continue to do so until some shift frees me from that pattern and moves me on to another.

The Gestalt approach certainly has its limits. You cannot fundamentally reveal to yourself what you are not ready to know, or what is not relatively easily available to you. Some therapists, Winnicott for example, would in any case argue that good interpretations by an analyst are similarly those that are 'almost on the lips' of the client. But there is no doubt that by its nature, deeply repressed material is not as likely to emerge easily in this way, and may well need the help of other techniques, or of interpretations based on other theories, to be allowed into consciousness. Gestalt therapy thus offers us a most wonderful window into ourselves, but there are also other windows that we need to find.

If we compare Gestalt Therapy to, say, psychoanalysis, we see a tremendous contrast. The concepts of human development and indeed of the psychotherapeutic relationship that we have gained from psychoanalysis are so rich, varied, and profound that humanistic psychologists have been forced to 'co-opt' many of them into their new philosophical framework. As a method, however, free association doesn't easily enable one to come face to face with one's unconscious - one tends to view it

more 'through a glass darkly', by reflection from the analyst.

Are the psychoanalytical and the other 'regressive' type theorists correct that you must go into the deep past, and the repressed unconscious, to do justice to what a client needs? One first needs to understand that going into the past may have different meanings, or a different function in different therapies.

In psychoanalysis, the past, like the unconscious, is almost a place you go to that is the substrate of experience, the real motivating force of everyday behaviour: and unless one goes there one is dealing with defensive material, superstructure, false consciousness. But Jungians, existentialists, and humanistic psychologists tend to view going back into the past as a way of revealing the 'mould' or pattern into which our relationships and attitudes fall.

Early family relationships reveal a kind of mythic structure within which we may still be operating. Just as linguistically we tend to say what our language makes easy for us to say, but are capable of creating new words if we are forced to, so we tend to fall into the old patterns unless we jolt ourselves out or are jolted out of them by a new relationship, or a crisis, or therapy or any form of meeting that is so extreme that it dislodges us. Going into the past is one of the most powerful ways of uncovering these moulds and shifting them, a way that it is difficult to do without, but there are certainly other ways. This.

must obviously be true since some people manage to solve their problems not only without regression but without therapists.

It is easy to get too stuck in a linear perspective, whereby, as in my dream, if we can't get back to our starting point we cannot continue on the journey. Time is not linear, and certainly human time is not. Past, present, and future are continually in the process of reconstructing themselves in the light of the other. When my past seems full of memories of being a victim, my present and future look full of traps that I am about to fall into. If I am depressed in the present, my history reveals itself to me as one of misery and my future looks hopeless. When I have a sense of purpose about the future, the self-same history is rather a series of steps ineluctably leading to that purpose, and the present is delightful. In those wonderful moments of finding a 'truth that sets us free', past, present, and future together as part of a total life meaning; to be forced to choose one as the most important would be rather like being posed a choice as to which was more important to save - body, mind, spirit or environment.

My own commitment is to develop methods of finding truth that doesn't necessarily depend on therapists, but can rather help us to tap the enormous resources

within us as part of an everyday healthy practice, a kind of psychotherapeutic equivalent of yoga or meditation. It is for this reason that I now specialise in teaching the use of visualisation, or image making, as a self-help method of 'reaching the parts that verbal thoughts cannot reach' and integrating the conscious and the unconscious self. The clue supplied by Gestalt therapy, that one can talk to, and inhabit images, other people, our left hand, or our symptoms, is so simple that it is profoundly significant.

The other night I was woken at 3 in the morning by someone who had just learned that his ex-lover, who I myself knew, had committed suicide. He was not my client; it was the middle of the night, and I too was distressed at the news. But I was able to offer him the advice I gained originally from Gestalt. "Talk to her, and listen to what she has to say to you, and keep talking until you are ready to say goodbye". He rang me a day or two later and told me that he had done so, and she had reminded him of the time that she used to slap his face and say 'Don't be so serious'. He used her communication to let go of some of his guilt and pain, and to face what he was going through, and was now continuing the conversation. He thanked me, and I thanked the Gestalt approach.

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