

BEYOND RIGHT AND WRONG

Marianne Fry interviewed by Judith Hemming

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Editor's Note: Marianne Fry is a highly experienced and much loved Gestalt trainer who now lives in Sussex. She is a founding Teaching Member of the Gestalt Psychotherapy Training Institute and a visiting trainer for the Gestalt Education Network International. The interview touches on her background in Gestalt, her interests and philosophy of training, her views of recent developments in Gestalt therapy, and a variety of other topics which she explores with her customary insight and outspokenness.

Beginnings

What were the beginnings of your interest in psychiatry and therapy?

During the war I worked in a nursery where I was in charge of thirty, two to five year olds. The nursery was set up for mothers to be free to do war work in munitions. I really think that was the beginning of my therapeutic career. I still remember those children; they must be grandfathers by now. I did that for four years and when the war was over, on the strength of that, I got a grant to do a diploma in something called Public and Social Administration. It was a social work training at Oxford. And then I went to Edinburgh University and did an additional year of a course in mental health, a training for psychiatric social work. So I had what they called then a degree equivalent, though there were no degrees in this field at the time. I got a job in a very big psychiatric hospital in Surrey where there were over 2,000 patients. So that was my beginning.

How did you find working in that context?

There were four of us psychiatric social workers employed there. We were the only people who had any kind of clue about psychotherapy because we did have a certain amount of training during our course. And so we were let loose on the patients. That's really what started my interest. After some years it got me to think about going into psychotherapy myself. And so I went to work with a Kleinian analyst who had herself been analysed by Melanie Klein. She took me on because I had three children and her interest was to work with mothers of children. I worked with her for three years. That got me into working psychodynamically. I had a personal analysis; there was no humanistic psychotherapy training then. By the 1960s I was running groups, learning more about family therapy, going up to the Tavistock Clinic to do courses and working in the Cardiff Institute of Family Therapy. I did some T-group training too. I really immersed myself into anything that came my way. Then

I moved from adult psychiatry into child and family psychiatry. Altogether I worked for fifteen years as part of a team with psychiatrists and psychologists. I worked with parents, couples, individuals, parents' groups, I also worked with a group of under 5s, with autistic children, right across the board with adolescents. I got a lot of varied experience because the consultant in charge let me follow my own interests and I did.

So how did you come to be interested in Gestalt?

Well, it was also during those years that I slowly became dissatisfied with the psychodynamic approach. I got tired of sitting there with a so-called neutral face listening to mothers and being accepting and caring but not playing any kind of dynamic role. I became depressed when the children of the children started appearing at the clinic; I thought, there must be something else. During those years I started reading about Gestalt and went up to London to two growth centres called Community and Quaesitor. At one of them I went to an introductory Gestalt seminar run by Ischa Bloomberg, a contemporary of Perls. When I saw him working I had a great "Aha" experience and thought "This is how I want to learn to work!" He, at that time, was coming to live in England having been in Holland and America. He started a three year training course which I joined in 1973. So that was the beginning of my Gestalt training. Ischa had this wonderful immediacy of contact. I was excited to see him working with what was there, what he saw, what he heard, what was actually happening, and extracting from it the whole of that person's existence. I remember him once being asked by a woman to work with her dream. She started the dream and said, "It's four o'clock in the afternoon...." and he said "Stop!" He worked with her for an hour just on that sentence. I was so impressed. I also was alarmed, I was scared stiff because in those days Gestalt was not so far away from encounter groups and there was a lot of very harsh confrontation and what seemed to me almost sadistic treatment of people. But it all had that raw liveliness for me in contrast to the exactitude of psychodynamic psychotherapy.

The Aliveness of Gestalt

What else in Gestalt impressed you when you first came across it?

I think it was the aliveness that inspired me so much and the fact that I could use myself as I was at that moment - everything that I had - now and in the past. Everything that had led to my being as I was, was there for me potentially to use with a patient or client in an I -Thou relationship. The other person was there not just as " my patient " and I could feel the excitement of really meeting another human being. Also I could use all the messages my body gave me to recognise when I was receiving contradictory messages. For instance, I might have a client crying bitterly while I was feeling nothing in my heart. I could explore what that meant. I could use the existential moment which is so incredibly precious. That's what I met, when I met Gestalt therapy.

Can you compare this with what you were familiar with in the hospital setting in the sixties?

It was in contrast to what I call the pseudo objectivity of 'professional' empathy in the Health Service, having the patient coming as a supplicant where I was supposed to be a neutral screen. There are other ways in which that kind of work presented difficulties too. In an institution you have to work on two levels: one with your colleagues, the staff, and one with the patients and quite often there are varying things going on in these two levels. For example, when I worked in the Health Service I used to get a lot of envy and hostility from the nursing staff who felt that they were expected to care for a patient during their eight -hour shift while I was getting a patient from the ward for an hour's psychotherapy with me. They felt in extreme rivalry with me and sometimes didn't want a patient to come and see me. They'd say, " He's not well enough to come and see you today. " There's sometimes no one so rivalrous as a helper! Also, the way you have a patient referred to you makes a great difference to your subsequent way of working with them. I remember the Medical Superintendent of the hospital I worked in sending me a patient with his case notes; I read these notes which would say each week something like 'try this drug' or 'try that drug' . This went on for about three months and the last entry was 'try Mrs Fry!'. I used to get a lot of these kind of 'last ditch' referrals.

It sounds as if your way of working then would be in great contrast to working in private practice

Well I always assumed that private practice was the ultimate place that you got to after all those years before the mast! I wouldn't actually recommend to anyone that they work for fifteen years in the Health Service like I did. But maybe two years wouldn't be a bad idea. If you're working in independent practice you should at least acquire enough diagnostic skills to know who you can safely work with. When I began working there wasn't anywhere else to go than in the Health Service in this country but the culture has changed; people can work on their own now. In those days it was unheard of.

What did you find when you moved into Gestalt?

I found that I could use all of myself with everything that I was, positive and negative. It was useful therapeutically to meet

another person as a full person rather than as a sounding board and as a stage for transference. It was a great release. I've always been dialogic, although in my Gestalt training in the late sixties and early seventies, I got people beating cushions and screaming 'I hate you,' squeezing towels and strangling their mothers and all that. That was how we started and I think it was some kind of extreme swing of the pendulum from the psychoanalytically orientated way of working. I did that along with the best of them!

Bypassing Anger

Have you given that up now?

Just occasionally I encourage someone to yell, but come to think of it it's not quite all gone because one thing I enjoy doing with people is to do playacting in order to get in touch with the polarities, to encourage people to act the polarity which they deny. So a lot of the humorous and playful things that I initially learnt in Gestalt I still do. But I quite often bypass anger. I'm criticized for that. I bypass it in favour of sorrow, grief, despair and abandonment because so often anger is like a stony layer over the hurt and the injury underneath. It isn't always necessary to stay in the anger layer. Sometimes it's obvious that people need to express their anger if they sit in front of me and talk very gently and clench their hands. So I may draw attention to that, encourage them to do it more. When it's obvious I go with the obvious. I'm thinking of someone I worked with the other day where what I noticed were her tight lips, her anger. But what we worked on was not her anger but her despair. I'm much more interested in that than the acting out of anger as we used to promote in the old days, with screaming and people would actually being sick in a bucket in the middle of the group room - the one who could do that most was the one who was admired by all ! But I think it brought a false sense of relief, a belief that someone had really dealt with something, for ever. Quite often there would then be a loving feeling towards the hated one, as part of the process, but somehow I'm not interested in doing that any more; perhaps it's just to do with me. I do sometimes encourage people to direct anger towards me. I find that more truthful than beating up characters from the past. I prefer to give my attention to the injury rather than the anger that lies over it. This has become more fashionable again recently; before that I used to stick out like a sore thumb in Gestalt. I was criticised for being psychoanalytical by my first trainer - the worst kind of criticism you could receive in those days! Nowadays its a compliment. But the focus I have helps shape the ways people express themselves in my groups.

Groups: the Nazi Theme

Tell me about some of the groups you run.

I go to Germany to work with an institute called GENI – Gestalt Education Network International, based in Frankfurt, and with them I do some training, though not as often as I used to, more to keep my connections with them now. I work with the more advanced training groups and I do special theme workshops for the Institute. I've done several workshops on Gestalt Dreamwork and on what I call 'The Second Half of Life' and Transpersonal Gestalt and I am planning to do one on the

theme of being Jewish.

You've been thinking about that theme recently as I understand it because of working with people whose parents were Nazis or who were involved in the war.

Well that theme comes up constantly, yes. The people I'm working with are either children or grandchildren of Nazis – usually grandchildren by now. But there are some of the older people who remember their fathers who were Nazis. That is very emotional for everybody including myself, often difficult. Recently I was running a group for older people and there was a woman in the group in her late forties, very beautifully dressed and perfect looking. On the second day of the workshop she said to me, "Marianne, every time I say anything you ignore me. I'd like to know, is that true?" I thought and said "You're right" and I had no idea how that was happening. She then talked about her life; we found she was married to a man who had been in the SS when he'd been very young, who was still at heart a Nazi; from whom she was trying to separate but felt unable to do so because she was dependent on him. Somehow I seemed to have some kind of feel for that without really knowing. This has happened a few times, that I see someone and feel some kind of block to communication without knowing what it is. Once we talk about it, it doesn't remain as a block. I was working in Switzerland once with a group of educators and Gestaltists and a perfectly ordinary woman came into the group. I felt totally repulsed. I didn't want anything to do with her. I watched everyone embracing her and I didn't know what it was. But the next morning it revealed itself; she was the daughter of a man who had been a very high up judge in the Nazi period; she as a young girl had been living in Prague with her father who was part of the Nazi occupation of Prague. At the end of the war he had been condemned to ten years of 'Zuchthaus', the worst kind of prison for the worst kind of prisoner. "But of course he hadn't done anything" she said. At that I totally lost my cool and said to her, "How can he not have done anything?" There was uproar in the group. One man who had been very badly physically abused was critical of me because group leaders were not supposed to be 'emotional'. He told me I should have adjusted myself to this kind of thing. I shouted at him, "I'll NEVER be adjusted to that!" I thought then I couldn't work with this sort of situation; I'd have to leave. And then in the afternoon we all went up into the mountains. There was snow and sun and the whole thing seemed to be dropping from me. The judge's daughter sought me out the whole of the rest of the workshop all week, always wanting to stand near me and talk to me, invited me to her home. I found that I was able to communicate with her. She herself was a therapist, a left radical politically. That event was remarkable.

You're standing for something that I imagine is not spoken about by most Germans?

I get mixed reactions. Some people say to me, 'I've been back to my parents and I've proudly told them that my Gestalt trainer is Jewish,' or 'You're the first Jewish person I've ever met in my life!' or group members might cry and say, 'I'm feeling very guilty towards you for what my ancestors have done to you.'

So you carry a huge meaning for them.

Yes, it's very powerful. I have planned to run a workshop in Germany on that theme with a young trainee whose parents

were extreme Nazis: a workshop run by a Nazi child and a Jewish child, but so far I've not quite mustered up the courage to do that because what happens in the ordinary workshops is powerful enough. I don't quite know if I'm going to be able to take it.

How is this theme affected by the current resurgence of Nazism in Germany?

The rise of Nazism now is more confined to skinheads and groups of people very alien to those I work with, who all condemn what's going on. We're all of the same opinion. Where it's difficult is where their own parents have been involved. A lot of the younger Germans have broken with their parents, resolved their difficulties by either having no connection or very shallow relations. And there's another thing; they're very unused to connecting deeply to an older person, they're not used to talking about their feelings about what really touches them to someone of my age group. So I'm a totally strange person to them, but also very loved - it may be to do with the fact that I was born in Germany and that I am German-Jewish and every now and then there is someone who has relatives in the town where I was born. And there's also a lot of personal connection for me in the language. When we're working I remember songs from my childhood, old parental phrases, bits of poetry which come from very early in my life. That gives it all a very special and different flavour.

Theme and Structure

You have Spoken before of your working style being in some way anti-theme or structure and yet you use both themes and structures for your groups. Can you talk about this?

A theme is more there to give a focus and then I see what emerges in the process. And I think I can only work in this way because there are other people who are willing to do didactic teaching, who carry the final responsibility for training. I can set up a workshop with a title, so people come with interest and expectations, with ideas and feelings about the title. The focus is already set up when they arrive. With a dream workshop for instance, I talk briefly about my interest in dreams, daydreams and fantasies, dream-like experiences, dreams from childhood, recurrent dreams and so on. So I give people a wide field from which to choose what they might be interested in. As the workshop goes on over the days, I suggest that people focus on their dreams while the workshop is going on. It doesn't really take all that much to set some kind of focus. It's rather like sliding down a hill on something nice and mobile. What you meet on the way is what is happening. So I just set something in motion, believing that the process will take over, which it always does, amazingly. One person's process sparks off the next person's process and all I do is uncover that. If someone has something in the foreground which is other than a dream and they want to communicate that, I wouldn't say 'no, that doesn't fit in here now,' because that wouldn't help the process. I have no special slots for theory teaching, but use the live events, soon after they have happened, to bring in understanding and grounding through discussion.

How differently do you work with group process compared to working with individuals?

It's very different because it works with very different energies. What I do with someone on their own carries with it much more subtle energies. What happens in a group consists of all the combined energies there and so is often less complex, more energetic, a different quality to it, it's hard to describe. The process is really the only thing I'm interested in because that is ever-changing, never boring, always there and always totally new. I'm still doing groups because of that newness or else I would be bored out of my mind. I sometimes say in groups that what we're doing together is watching a totally new organism you could call it a plant or a flower- grow which is unique, never grown before. That's the excitement of it.

Is a group then an appropriate place to do individual therapy?

I think therapy happens in a group as a by-product. It happens because people come to the group at a certain point in their life when there are certain themes for them which are in the foreground. If you illuminate those themes with them then there are new recognitions. You could call that therapy. But I think it's very dangerous to do one off therapy. You get into illusions if you as a therapist think that because you make some kind of stunning discovery with someone in a group that this is going to change their lives or is going to have a lasting beneficial effect. I don't believe it. I'm arguing against that way of working and the expectation of revolutionary changes. That illusion is one that can be fostered by both participants and trainers. It's different with once weekly therapy in a group, where people meet together and have an ongoing relationship. My teacher used to say there's all the difference between being a visitor to New York and living there. It's easy and tempting to imagine that great changes have been achieved in one off groups.

I would like you to talk some more about the range of things you don't believe in. You're operating a very pared down vision of Gestalt: anti-technique, anti-structure, an anti evangelical vision of therapy.

And paradoxically enough I think my vision is more evangelical than anybody else's, because it is a quasi-religious vision that I do have, My faith in the process for instance, my faith in the almost infinite capacity of each individual to reach out in a way that they by themselves wouldn't dream of being able to do. My pared down view is something to do with the infinity of potential. These kinds of thoughts never came to me when I was working psychodynamically. That was totally different and very structured - also a pared down way of working. only different.

The Second Half of Life

How does this view relate to your groups on the 'second half of life'?

The wonderful thing about being old is that you can have expressed your grief and sorrow and gone beyond it. I don't see old age as a time for grieving over losses, more as a chance to transform them into new learning, new ways of looking at life, For instance, women especially feel bad about losing their sexual attractiveness, having wrinkles or sexually unattractive figures. In that loss can lie a tremendous freedom, As an old woman you

no longer have to play that role; you can be truly yourself; you can be eccentric, outrageous in a way that you never could while you were being forced by the culture to adhere to certain desirable stereotypes. There are very few people who manage to resist that. So I'm thinking of the new freedom, and of the teaching you get through illness; of how you can no longer rely on your independence, how you may have to become humble, to learn to be helpless, to learn to accept; how you really have to complete your life by returning to where you came from, almost to yourself as infant if you take it to the extreme. And I think if you can do that, and this time with awareness, then that is a very beautiful completion of the life cycle. You're forced to let go of a lot of your ego props. All these things are an opportunity for you to develop and shed.

Do you always work with mixed groups?

Yes, if possible. But very many more women have the courage to come than men. Some men come, but men have much more trouble letting their egos go than women. Men often try to compensate by finding very much younger women and pretending they're not getting old, denying. But for both sexes there's the opportunity for spiritual development. In my work I'm firstly encouraging recognition of the loss, the sadness; and acceptance of what is. And when that happens there's a kind of joyfulness that comes as part of the process. I'm encouraging people to accept, to be able to say in public how they feel about their wrinkles or their thighs, for instance, to tell the truth about whether they dye their hair. These kind of things are often , unspoken in our society. If there are one or two people in the group who are willing to go deeper and deeper and connect more with their higher selves, their spirit, then that opens doors for others who might never have connected with that aspect of themselves. Groups are wonderful for this - they can act as witness and as loving support.

The Shadow

You've also talked of the need in groups to make space for the shadow, and of groups which haven't all been loving, for instance in some of your residential groups in France.

I've had one or two groups that have been really difficult. I had one experience in France in the year of the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution with a group I've never had before and hope I will never have again, who fought viciously right through the two weeks with a few pauses for taking breath and were so destructive and negative with each other that I was in disbelief. I allowed it to go on until I eventually forbade the group to speak negatively to one another. I've never done that before. So we came to some kind of integration at the end. Quite often, especially during long residentials, there's a place after the first four days or so when all the negativity is acted out not only within the group, where people drop china, flood the place, drop the iron on the floor and so on - all kinds of things happen and what I usually do is draw attention to that. I say " Express your negativity in the group rather than leaving your coffee cups all over the place. " and that's very good; that's actually a living experience, not just in the group with words but twenty-four hours a day.

So you don't so much focus on negativity but you might draw attention to it in a group and even at a certain point call it to a halt?

Yes. I find, for instance, that victim behaviour and persecution I call to a halt. A couple of summers ago I had a woman in my group who was a professional victim, who had stories to tell that made everybody's hair curl – real stories, terrible stories. We listened to these stories for a while but they went on for days. That was all she did, to present herself as a victim. I found myself getting furious with her, really angry. So when she started on another story I said, "I don't want to hear it." Some of my gentle soft group members were very surprised to hear me being angry and authoritative with her, forbidding her to tell yet another victim story even though they were true stories of what she had suffered.

You were obviously being authentic, using all of yourself, but I imagine you were also basing your response on a belief about what she might need.

Yes. This particular woman felt she was only acceptable to other people if she could tell them of her suffering and they could sympathise. So she didn't feel she had any value as a person except through these terrible stories – that's what I wanted to cut through. I don't really behave consistently though, since I've told you how I don't work with anger and now I'm telling you stories in which I was furious, or I forbade people to do things. And I can be rude. Someone in a group complained to me that I had said "Bullshit!" to her. I asked her about the context of my remark. She told me that she had said to another group member, "You know, what I'm always so afraid of is to damage you," and that's when I said "Bullshit!".

You're working with a high level of trust in yourself.

Yes, and I'm also prepared to accept that I make mistakes, that I've seen something incorrectly. The paradox is that you're never mistaken if you're willing to admit mistakes. I don't have to be right; I'm willing to admit mistakes. I'm willing to apologise for hurting people, if people are hurt and that's very important to me. For a group leader to make a mistake can offer one of the best learning opportunities; people connect to you, you become one of them. Also the kind of mistakes I often find I make are unconsciously evocative of a situation which otherwise might not come out very clearly. I may say something appalling that I would never say if I really thought about it but it brings up something which wouldn't come up any other way. I'm not saying it's especially good to make mistakes or that I praise myself for it but I have an unconscious ability to evoke situations that are useful.

What do you mean by 'unconscious'?

What about 'out of awareness' then? Maybe I should have my responses within my awareness, should ideally use them consciously rather than have them appear as blunders. But I wouldn't always have the courage to say in full awareness some of the useful things I say as blunders! So maybe this is a little trick. It might seem too much of a risk, too appalling. And this kind of activity could be immoral too.

So how would you, as a trainer, help people differentiate between ethically trustworthy responses and those that aren't?

I remember long ago going to a Feldenkrais workshop where I judged the trainer himself as not having much integrity but what he was teaching us was very interesting. At one point he was teaching us while he was eating his lunch. I didn't like that and told him. He didn't apologise for it but turned it all back on me and asked me what it meant to me and so on. One of the usual therapeutic tricks where you turn around the reality. He might just have said "I'm sorry, I was in a hurry." I don't want to use my blunders like that. I would want to confess to them and apologise. For instance, with the woman who was still defending her Nazi father's actions, it would have been better and more direct of me to tell her of my reluctance to work with her. But the thing is there's something about the Nazi story that is so in my blood and bones that my soul knows about it long before my head knows about it. I recognised it in the woman and I wanted nothing to do with her. It is my response to people who are connected to the Nazi story but who deny it. I respond on a level I don't know about. What I did with that woman turned out to be fruitful, a fruitful blunder - I didn't deny what she said; I listened to her to discover what it was that had got me to ignore her. I said "tell me something about your life." This was fruitful for her because she dropped her mask. She had a mask-like face and she became real and we connected. She spoke from her true self which wasn't a Nazi self. How else can you get to the true self without first of all refusing to connect with the false self? My behaviour isn't a prescription for others though; I would never presume to tell others, this you can allow yourself in your response to people and this you can't.

Are you saying that you don't have to make any allowances for your feelings about Nazism whereas you might in relation to other prejudices or passions?

I have other prejudices which I recognise and I can allow for in myself. But this is something more; I can't think of anything else which has this particular effect on me, although I once had a young man in one of my groups in France where something similar but more explicit occurred. His reason for coming to the group was that he wanted to learn to attract and make better sexual relationships with young boys. I said I'd work with him only if he undertook not to act out, not to do what he wanted to do. This created a tremendous stir in the group. The man thought about my decision for twenty-four hours and came back saying he was not willing to change anything in his behaviour, so I refused to work with him, although I let him stay in the group. I can work with abusers only if they can make a contract with me not to act on their feelings.

Modelling as Teaching

Do you think in your work as a trainer that these central teachings on responsibility and morality can really only be modelled rather than taught?

Yes. In fact I think modelling is the most effective teaching. People who train with me often identify with me; it can be valuable. People can metabolise their trainer, digest the parts that are congruent with them and leave aside what isn't congruent. That is a very important learning process, the metabolising; more powerful and effective than any words you can say in teaching though this view is perhaps not so

fashionable now when there is more emphasis on learning from theory. Gestalt started with the Californian flavour of 'let everything hang out' and recently I think people have wanted to pull themselves up by their shoe laces and become respectable and that seems to involve a lot of words and theory. I remember once going to a Gestalt conference in Brazil. I thought, " Oh Brazil, good, they're so feeling! " I was looking forward to seeing them dance and hearing them sing but not a bit of it. They were all wearing grey and beige and giving very learned speeches on existentialism and phenomenology. I said "What's going on here?" and they said : "We're so in touch with our feelings; we can express ourselves so easily. What we have to learn is to connect that with our heads. "

Can you say something about how your beliefs reflect your own life and concerns?

I've always somehow managed my work to be a reflection of a particular life stage, so that when I was a mother with young babies I was interested in working with mothers who had difficulties with their infants and when my family was growing up I did a lot of family therapy. My interests in work were reflected in my life; that's been very fascinating and fruitful to me. When my children grew up and left I ceased to be interested in family therapy. Later I worked both in Germany and here for many many years and both the content of the work and the situation in which I work continued to change with my personal development. My most recent work, in Berlin for instance, is something totally new for me; I'm working in a school for Homeopaths who want to know something about how to work with people, apart from the teaching they're getting for treating people for various ailments and diseases. This also relates to what I was saying about the parallels between my life and my work, as my work with homeopaths now is connected to the issues of health and healing which I've become much more interested in. I connect them to the slow decay of my body and my health not being something which I can just take for granted. I'm more interested in what I can do about my health, what ways there are to work with my energy. So it is a plus that I am also working with older people on the subject of old age. As you fail you're forced to use whatever powers you have to focus on your body which at one time you took for granted. It's gain disguised as loss.

I'm interested to know how your work and attitudes to practice have developed most recently.

In one sense I'm still the same and in another I'm moving away from what I was and what I did, in that I'm getting more convinced now that 'I am not the doer,' and although I've paid lip service to this for many years I have a growing sense of integrating this into my work even if not always into my life. The more space I leave for - whatever you want to call it - the universe, the process, God, energy, I don't think its name matters - the more creativity occurs in the work. If I acknowledge my very limited knowledge then I leave space for synchronicity, for happenings which neither I myself nor the people I work with could expect or foretell. The canvas on which I work becomes, paradoxically, greater and greater the smaller I am willing to be.

What do you mean by 'the smaller I am willing to be'?

I like the image from the book "Grace Unfolding" by Johanson and Kurtz, which is about the spirit of the Tao, where they describe the therapist as being like a midwife, being there at the birth and helping the process - the baby - to emerge, and then withdrawing and allowing the glory of the moment to shine on the mother, the baby, and the father; and being content to have the work as the only acknowledgement of the work.

Can you say more about how you relate Taoism to Gestalt!

I reckon I'm a beginner as far as Taoism is concerned. But whenever I read something about it I feel I'm getting to know about the laws of life. It seems totally familiar and right to me, and it's only when I forget about these laws, which I frequently do, that I get myself into difficulties.

How does this affect your style of Gestalt practice?

Someone I work with might complain that I'm not doing anything or that there doesn't seem to be a great deal of action in my work. That would be on the negative side. I think that people take a little while to tune into the place from which I'm working and when they do they are as amazed and wondrous as I am when we both look at the emerging truths which seem to manifest just because we have given space to them in the work. Not everybody likes to work that way. Some people are sold on making a big effort. They get very worried if I seem to give them permission not to work hard.

It sounds as if your work is coming to demand more on the quality of your presence.

Yes, although I'm a little bit shy about calling it that. The right intervention can come from a healing presence; the doing can only emerge from the being and not the other way round. A right intervention may not be something very clever or rational or logical that I think out and say. That would be an illusion and I doubt that any therapist actually works in that way. I also know that Gestalt therapy provides a good basis. When an intervention comes from the healing presence it's also informed by Gestalt concepts and philosophy. It's very difficult to pinpoint how the two interact because they've been so metabolised in me that they manifest themselves without effort and even without thought. Provided we work with awareness it isn't so important to find the right intervention. What's more important is to be continuously connected with the other person. I'm remembering a story I heard a rabbi tell when someone asked him the meaning of 'harmony'. He said, " Well, if I say it's Wednesday and you say it's Wednesday that's harmony. And if I say it's Thursday and you say it's Sunday that's harmony too".

Beyond Right and Wrong

Are you wanting to move out of the realm where an intervention could be right or wrong?

Yes, definitely. I've just been working with people who've been trainees for quite a short time, and the theme of "am I doing it right?" was a very powerful theme and also a show stopper. I said to them, "as soon as you ask if you're doing it right you're sure to be doing it wrong!". I don't know if in teaching we can move

totally out of that but it would be a very interesting experiment to move out of right and wrong.

How would you teach?

Well, I suppose you could make anything into an introject even including awareness, so that “if you're not aware then you're wrong.” But I think maybe you could teach in the same way as you do therapy and that is to look in detail at what the trainee is doing rather than thinking about whether it's right or wrong.

Your vision seems to imply some criticism about how you see Gestalt being taught.

Yes, what I notice is that often Gestalt trainees get hooked on high energy, lively expressiveness, excitement, seemingly creative ways of being, and find it difficult to tolerate what you might call the troughs which are an essential aspect of the high wave. I did an experiment with trainees recently when I suggested that someone might spend at least an hour telling their life story to the group uninterruptedly and at the end we would give them feedback. Two people did that and they were the most moving times. But what I noticed was that the listeners had difficulty listening through the low energy, depressive phases of the story, the dark places, and they got very excited during the energy release phases, for instance when the story teller told of how they ran away with the man they were to marry after much suffering and depression. Gestalt teaching can promote an addiction to liveliness, which I can fully understand of course.

So what needs to change?

I find it just as depressing as anyone else to listen to expressions of depression and low energy but I hope I can be sufficiently withdrawn not to need the Gestalt adrenalin injections. You can only balance that by removing yourself a certain distance so that you can be there while it's happening without actually having to join in.

What other biases do you see in Gestalt that can lead to thinking in terms of right and wrong?

The most seductive bias I see is the bias of praise. But it's very difficult to detach yourself from that. I remember one of my supervisees saying how happy he was because a client was doing so well and how encouraged he was, and I talked to him about the need to be neither too encouraged at what seemed to be success nor too downcast at what seemed to be failure. Especially when you start it's very difficult not to get hooked on praise. There are narcissistic temptations that lie within the practice of Gestalt therapy and especially in Gestalt teaching and the running of groups; we all get hooked on the right way. and the wrong way. The paradox is that the real power that needs no affirmation is a very potent power.

Do you have other views or criticisms about the present state of Gestalt?

Yes. One of them is an inflated idea we often convey in training that we are so important as therapists. We teach people that our way is the only way, or at least that psychotherapy is the only way. I don't think we're sufficiently humble about our ignorance of so many aspects of someone's being. I miss the humility that I think is necessary. A lot of people go into psychotherapy because of their self doubts and I include myself in that and as a way of understanding themselves better and also as a way to reassure themselves by being in a position of power

over other people - the whole helping syndrome. There seems to be an assumption that we're very knowledgeable when I think we're not, that what we see is very much a segment of the whole but we think it is the whole. I would like to see more acknowledgement of that, of our ignorance. Psychotherapy attracts people with powerful narcissistic processes; that's all right as long as we know. I sometimes say to people in groups, “If you want a lot of attention in your life, become a Gestalt psychotherapist!” And something else that inspires annoyance in me is what I call the use of “Gestalt Gobbledygook,” using language that ordinary educated people wouldn't understand. It suggests a poverty, a paucity of language itself, so when people say that something is 'figure' for them, I cringe, or that they are 'retroreflecting'. In friendly conversation for shorthand it's alright but to talk that way when you're teaching or writing I find unacceptable. When I was first taught to be a psychiatric social worker we were taught psychiatry together with the medical students at Edinburgh University and we used to have to write a social history for the people who were admitted to the professor's unit. We were forbidden to use any psychiatric terms without fully explaining them. That was a very good rule and I would like to insist on using plain language without any of the pseudo-professional stuff that is being used and even encouraged in Gestalt. The use of jargon is a pity; it's also a fixed Gestalt. Instead of describing what a person is doing you say they're retroreflecting; that's a fixed Gestalt - it's not a live description of the person.

The Power of Service

What else is now interesting you ?

I went to Findhorn recently to a conference called “The Power of Service” and that 'met' me totally. The focus was on service to oneself, service to the other, to the community and to God. This was service as a joyful and self-fulfilling pursuit rather than as a sacrifice; service as a privilege. That's something I want to focus on much more. The other thing I want to focus on is active meditation, through music, sound, dance and breathing. I wish this to have a very much greater prominence in Gestalt teaching.

How might active meditation affect Gestalt practice?

Meditation through self-expression is the most centering activity that you can possibly have as a place from which to start working. Whenever I run a workshop now I always start with a chant because music is such a force, such a wonderful medium. I'm surprised we don't use it more in Gestalt. Meditation removes the blinkers so that a much wider vision is possible. Working with sound and music is so healing I want to bring it in much more in groups.

Can you say something about the spiritual aspect of your work?

There are some people in Gestalt who are very powerfully on their spiritual path and who say that their spiritual development is their own private pursuit and is not to be brought into their work and their teaching. I think that is a point of view, AND I don't believe them because I think it's impossible not to bring it in even in an indirect way. You might as well be open. What

I've started to do is to tell people sometimes what I think they should do and also what I think they should stop doing immediately, and this comes from my spiritual development although it is a totally 'unGestalt' thing to do. I remember once having a man in my group whose mother was dying. He had had a lot of problems with this mother but she then had only a day or so to live. This man sat in the group and talked of his not feeling sure he wanted to see her that night; perhaps he'd go home and relax and take a shower. He wanted to keep a sense of choice. I just said to him " Your mother is dying. You need to go to her NOW. " I didn't care what else had been going on with his mother; she was dying and that was no time to think of relaxing, whatever had gone on before. Perhaps that's not just a spiritual

position but a moral one too. My spiritual path comes from many religions; I've never followed one path. I'm impressed by the Buddhist teaching of right speech, right action and so on; and it's on that basis for instance that I don't allow verbal abuse in groups even in the name of someone getting something off their chest. Similarly I would be encouraging people in my groups for older people, for instance, to be finding meaning, to become closer to God, to realise themselves as a soul. The soul can really only blossom when there is freedom from material preoccupations and possessions and ego needs. You can see this freedom sometimes in old people shining in their face, a brightness, 'verklart', something close to ecstasy.

Thank you very much indeed.

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