

GESTALT AFTER FRITZ¹

I must confess that I was never interested in the history of Gestalt Therapy nor did I feel I had anything to contribute to it before Riccardo Zerbetto asked me to prepare a statement for the twenty-year retrospective that was anticipated for last year. That retrospective didn't come to pass, however, and Dr. Zerbetto, who became one of the organizers of this Conference, told me that he wished I would still contribute with some reflections on the subject. Later, still, he had in mind a session devoted to the history of Gestalt in which my report on "Gestalt after Fritz" would be part of a trio performance, along with speakers addressing themselves to the New York and California years of Perls' lifetime. The task that I undertook of reviewing the Gestalt literature and the *Gestalt Journal* in chronological sequence led me to see some things more clearly and to feel now truly interested in sharing my reflections on Gestalt history.

Since nobody from New York has shown up and Abe has preferred to speak most personally of his process of becoming a Gestaltist, I have felt inclined to speak not only of "Gestalt after Fritz" but also of what Gestalt I was exposed to during Fritz's Esalen years. More recently, I have felt inclined to emphasize what I see as the experiential root of Fritz's late (West Coast) work: the "new beginning" that he

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experienced at the time of his crisis as a sexagenarian in Israel. It is because of this that when Riccardo, weeks ago, asked me over the telephone how I would call this talk, I said (not wanting to make an already extended long distance call any longer) "Gestalt Therapy after Jerusalem." He sounded startled, as if taken aback at such apocalyptic language. I suppose that he assumed that this is how it would sound to people not aware that Fritz's visit to Israel was the turning point of his life—an inner event that made him, more than the talent he had been, a master. Also, although the title I suggested in haste was appropriate to my meaning in view of its double reference—both to Fritz's months in Israel and to something of "apocalyptic" proportions. It was certainly not exact in a technical sense, since Fritz did not spend much time in Jerusalem, and the exact site of his life changing pilgrimage was Einhod².

Let me then begin my account with a consideration of Fritz's coming to Einhod. Einhod is a colony of artists south of Haifa where Fritz stopped in the middle of his wandering when he (as he tells us in his autobiography) felt "imprisoned in life," condemned to life and not even depressed, though in despair. In response to Dr. Simkin's invitation he had come to California and then decided to return from California to New York not Eastward, but Westward, around the world.

He first stopped in Japan and he fell in love with Kyoto. When, after this journey around the world, he ended up by establishing himself in Esalen (to a point, for he was always a "gypsy") two places competed in his mind with Big Sur—Kyoto and Israel—

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Though I have decided to speak of Fritz's activity in his late years as well as of Gestalt Therapy after Fritz, as I go into print I have decided to keep the original "Gestalt after Fritz" title because of its double meaning—according to alternative senses of the word "after." For Fritz's Gestalt Therapy after his "Jerusalem" was "after" him in the same sense of the word intended when we speak of a painting after Rembrandt.

the stay at which was for Fritz like a pilgrimage within his pilgrimage. He had made contact with the hippie spirit in Einhod and this had a great impact on him because he had been running after glory and fame and achievement, and surely did not have a conception of what it was like to do nothing.

He has told us in his autobiography what a profound impact it was on him to find people who were only seeking, and seeking something of a different order than the agitation that had moved him thus far. He devoted himself to painting and seriously considered dropping out of the therapeutic profession. The person who became closest to him in those days, Hillel (one of the founders of the village actually and a very remarkable person of a long lineage of saints in Israel) reported to Jack Gaines on occasion of his book of the seventies:

"He told me directly he didn't want to be a psychiatrist any more, he didn't want to do any more psychotherapy, he wanted to devote his whole life from now onwards to painting and art, to painting and music, actually he said. He dropped his past; however, he came back to psychotherapy, and he came back to that which he had dropped after an experience which was like a new birth."

This perception coincides with that of Dr. Kulcar, a psychiatrist to whose facility Fritz came every week to work on himself under the effects of LSD. Dr. Kulcar had developed great admiration for Fritz, claiming no merit for these sessions—which he did not even regard as psychotherapy, since Fritz was able to work effectively on himself: "He treated himself and it was not depression; it was pain of growth, it was pain of a new birth."

When I knew Fritz at Esalen—and when the whole world came to know Fritz through Esalen, for by now he had become a highly charismatic person—he was not exactly the same Fritz we had known previously. I think we can say he had always

manifested a great talent, but now had come the time of flowering of his genius. There is a great difference between talent and genius. Genius is not just a potentiality, nor is it just instrumental abilities, but it involves a deep contact of a person with the core of his or her being. The greatness that those of us who knew him in this second stage of life sensed in him, was, I think, the expression of his ripeness, and not something that had been evident in the first stage of his life, great as his talent may have been.

Yet it was not just the flowering of Fritz's genius that underlay the striking "Gestalt explosion" of the mid-sixties; another factor in it was Esalen, or, more generally, the beginnings of the "California Phenomenon." There was a providential synergy between his coming to California with something important to offer and the remarkable community there. For not only in Israel, but also very especially in California, people who were essentially seekers in a more than intellectual way were finding an oasis and forming a movement that launched a counter-culture into being.

Not only did Fritz have something substantial to offer: he had come to a different level of self-realization and authoritativeness — as he states very clearly in his autobiography, when he says that he has found "the Tao and the truth." Though he sometimes qualified this statement (as when he says, "I have not made it to the final enlightenment grade, if it exists") he was in a position of abundance and fulfillment, and this was expressed through a natural sense of authority. I felt that those of us who came into contact with him treated him very much like Zen masters are treated, not in virtue of any traditional investiture, but because there was an implicit sense that "he knew." And surely the intuition was not wrong, for his perceptions were confirmed again and again. The extent to which this was true was surely a factor in his psychotherapeutic effectiveness. I give you an

example: Hillel, his host and teacher of painting in Israel, says: "We didn't have to talk much, we read each other's thought" and he tells that he (Hillel) was not only a painter but that he had attempted to be a writer, and that he had stopped writing because it was very difficult for him, hardly compatible with his family life. He was in a conflict between having a space to write and having the sense of isolation required by him to write, and had felt very interrupted by his wife. In spite of his not having communicated to Fritz, Fritz once approached him and said, "Hillel you should write, not paint. But when you get back to writing, you should have your own room and don't give your wife a copy of the key." This may be regarded as quite an elaborate clairvoyant feat. He never talked about this, but I think this extreme intuition was more an explanation of what he could do than any theoretical framework.

What was Fritz like during this time I call the "flowering of his genius"? What were the qualities of his mind? What were the aspects of his being that accounted for this extraordinary effectiveness? I speak of the time when people started coming to Esalen from the East Coast — people from all walks of psychotherapy — including psychoanalysis — almost as if to see a miracle worker in action.

Things happened in one hour of therapy for which there was no precedent. Sometimes it is said that Milton Erickson was a genius like that. If there is anybody that could be compared, it would be Erickson, for I doubt that Freud had a comparable therapeutic genius notwithstanding his momentous contribution to psychology and culture. We felt (and by "we" I mean people like Virginia Satir, Jerry Greenwald, William Golding, Abe Levitsky, and others from my first training group), that we were before something unique, something totally new. And it was, though we may now feel that this became commonplace.

One element of that was what today is beginning to be called "dialogical." I should remark that even though Fritz was quite aware of Buber, only very slowly is Buberian language coming into the Gestalt discourse. It is the Old (New York) word "contact" that is mostly used. I am a little unhappy with it because of its ambiguity. Of course, it points in the right direction; but it may refer to being in touch with the inner world or with the outer; sometimes it makes a reference to sensory contact, sometimes to motor contact, for instance, and these are quite different things. I think it is more useful to reserve the word *awareness* for contact with one's experience, for instance. Also when we refer to the interpersonal situation and borrow the word "contact" from the mechanical world, there is something missing, for it fails to evoke something bigger than sensory-motor contact, which happens to be the most essential part of human contact: that contact "from heart to heart," from essence to essence or center to center—that Buber calls "encounter" or "relationship." Though there is some differentiation in Buber's use of "encounter" and "relationship," both have to do with the *sense of the other as subject*, a sense of the other as something beyond an object of thought, manipulation or desire. There is a gratuitousness in the approach involved in the ability to perceive the "other" as "you," and the "I" that sees "You" is not the same as the "I" that sees "It" (as Buber points out at the beginning of his *I and Thou*).

I think this was something that Fritz had to an extraordinary degree: the ability to be present, to be there. To be present as living and lived existence, and to make you feel that you were there. Sometimes he might make a psychotherapeutic intervention out of that. "Who is telling me this?" When I once answered him, "I am saying this," he retorted, "Are you?" "I don't hear *you*." It's not just the external behavior that is the target of such statements—such as somebody

looking at the floor or looking at somebody else instead of making face to face contact. Sometimes all the external signs of contact may be there, and *still* something deeper is missing. "Are you talking to me?" Fritz could then say, "I don't feel that you are addressing me." That is very subtle. It is in another realm—a realm of personhood and presence beyond biological input and output.

I think this subtlest realm of contact was *one* element of his "dialogical" activity. If we take "dialogical therapy" to be synonymous (as M. Friedman does) with "therapy through meeting," he was *extremely* dialogical, and I think that Friedman has been most unfair to him in his book on the subjects. When I met Friedman some time ago in Switzerland at the Conference on "Healing the Earth and Visioning the Future," I had a very good feeling for him, and I felt his way of talking about Buber was particularly coherent with what could be said of Fritz, principally in regard to Buber's conception of a "holy struggle" with the other and the responsibility of challenging. Also "Fritzian" was the distinction Friedman drew between confluence and contact: he was challenging the "New Age" spirit inasmuch as it involves an indulgence in dwelling on feelings of brotherhood and sameness without proper acknowledgement of differences and boundaries.

When after this meeting with Friedman I got his book, I was amazed to find that he gives more credit to Jungians, to object relations therapists and to practically every school of psychotherapy than to Gestaltists! Amazed, because it seems to me that Gestalt has contributed more than any other approach to the liberation of present day psychotherapy from fixed roles and techniques, and especially the Gestalt example has been an inspiration to psychotherapy in general for the greater freedom that it has given the

³ Maurice Friedman, *The Healing Dialogue in Psychotherapy* (New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1985).

therapist for using oneself as a person rather than as a mirror and a technician.

Fritz was a great person manipulator too; indeed, in one of my first conversations with him, he defined his activity as precisely that. But beyond that, he was one who used himself if we can say "use" for what derives from believing in the primacy of encounter over everything else. Only in the case of R.D. Laing can we say, I think, that therapy and life were so close; that the distinction between therapy and the situation outside therapy was so slight.

Another element in that very extraordinary presence of Fritz was an element that already in the sixties (after one of his workshops) I called his "so-whatness." It took me some time to realize that what I was calling his "so-whatness" was of the same nature as that which he called "creative indifference." An expression of it was his extraordinary ability to withstand manipulation. He would not be sucked into any games, and was able to stand in his neutrality. of course, it is part of the golden rule in psychoanalysis to cultivate neutrality, but that is a more "gimmicky" or at least procedural neutrality, embodied to a large extent in what words are said or not said and in whether you sit behind the couch or not, whereas his was a more profound neutrality, which had more to do with what in the Buddhist language is called detachment or non-attachment. Fritz had attained spontaneously a remarkable degree of non-attachment, and this was very visible in the presence of "drama" - i.e. in the presence of a person dramatizing pain; it was in these cases where he might say, "So what? Are you going to weep over the past forever?"

This was an invitation for a more salutary attitude in the here and now, a more healthy attitude of accepting the pain of life for what it is, as well as from a familiarity with the "poor me" game and the notion that consciousness is restricted to the extent

that we avoid pain. It was part of his implicit theory of psychotherapy that because we don't want to suffer, we cannot see, and it was part of his practice to invite and even push toward the direct confrontation of pain. This was quite explicit, and Fritz often compared himself to a surgeon,

Another trait that I find very characteristic of this stage of Fritz's life is something that might be called a perfection-in-imperfection. There was a kind of greatness to him, but a very paradoxical greatness, as I was pointing out yesterday in some of the anecdotes that came to my mind as a result of the invitation to share memories of him at the end of our pre-conference dinner. It seems to me that when one talks about Fritz, one naturally gravitates to these controversial (apparently very "shitty") doings of his. And yet we sense (and perhaps this is our interest in such anecdotes) that it was not just that he was being a son-of-a-bitch. It's more what he once said of himself—that he was "50% son-of-a-bitch and 50% son-of-God." It was in that integration that lay his uniqueness, the integration of holiness and ordinariness; a deep authenticity and a freedom to be not an animal (i.e., a biological being), and even a freedom to be selfish. I am reminded of Freud's answer to Binswanger when, later in his life, Binswanger reproached Freud for having insisted so much on the animal aspect of human life. Freud's reply was, "I have endeavored to remind man that he is also an animal."

There was something of this sort, but also something more—I cannot avoid using the word—mysterious. Something that has been scarcely talked about or written about, except in the worlds of Buddhism and Sufism, in both of which there is a recognition of a high wisdom that seems to wear the garb of behavior or speech that comes across as outrageous or even idiotic. In addition to the matter of an upside-downness of wisdom in an upside-down

world alluded to by Idries Shah's *The Wisdom of the Idiots*, I think "crazy wisdom" involves a phenomenon that seems not to have been spelled out. There are people who have evolved very much in whom even their idiotic part becomes a wisdom for others and even their mistakes become beneficent. I tried to express this in an interview quoted by Jack Gaines in his book⁴ by saying that in Fritz hatefulness became a gift to his patients and an asset in the destruction of their neurosis. Dr. Schnacke—a Chilean psychotherapist who wrote the introduction to the Spanish translation of Gaines' book and who never met Perls—thought that I had not understood him properly, and that I did not give him enough credit for being a loving person. She voiced the opinion that I should have said that Fritz wanted to destroy their ego, not destroy them. I think this falls short of the mystery, and Fritz himself would have objected to such depersonalizing language. It is something of a mystery, in people who evolved enough along the path of transformation, that their shortcomings spontaneously become aligned with their fundamental orientation without any intention on their part, and so—as Faust's Mephistopheles, they do good without intending to be good. I think this rare phenomenon was aptly grasped by the person who wrote the jacket blurb for the same book, which says that the phenomenon of Fritz Perls was that he "had horns and a halo at the same time." His kind of halo was one that arose from the acknowledgement of horns, perhaps.

When, at the age of 75, Fritz needed to be hospitalized in Chicago (on his way back from Germany to Vancouver) and died there after a surgical intervention, the fact that hundreds of hippies congregated outside the hospital in which he lay was a

⁴ Jack Gaines, *Fritz Perls: Here and Now* (Integrated Press: Tiburon, CA, 1979).

testimony to the fact that his activity has impinged not only on the individual lives of many patients and on his contemporary colleagues, but on the culture at large. His presence (as I have said on other occasions) had acquired prophetic stature. Though the healing potential of awareness and the "here and now" had been known to Buddhists and had been richly spelled out by Heidegger in *Being and Time* and though Ram Dass (through his book *Be Here Now*) and Alan Watts through his lectures contributed much to the popularization of the theme after Fritz, it is Fritz Perls who, more than anybody, deserves to be called a "prophet of the here and now" in our modern times. His living rather than intellectual influence was the most substantive in this regard, both on psychotherapy in general (beyond Gestalt) and in the "new consciousness" that was to spread from California to the whole Western world.

Gestalt Therapy has continued to expand both geographically and within our own society. It has come to be taught in India and Japan, and personal acquaintance with Gestalt Therapy in the U.S. has become very widespread. Most striking in this stage has been the expansion of Gestalt Therapy into the culture, as distinct from the counter-culture (in which it originated) as it has come to be taught in universities, applied to business and so forth. Related to this diffusion of Gestalt Therapy into mainstream society has been what we may call its institutionalization: 1) in that it has penetrated the established institutions, and 2) in that Gestalt practice has crystallized into a large number of Gestalt training centers throughout the world that are practically (if not academically) accredited and offer, in turn, accreditation. While we may assume that in this process there have developed refinements in Gestalt education and supervision, we should also be aware of how the adoption of psycho-spiritual values by the establishment and society at large also entails a

process of compromise. Thus it is legitimate to ask whether—along with the great international and intercultural diffusion of Gestalt Therapy in the last 20 years and with the existence of excellent representatives of the approach in many countries—there has not also taken place a dilution, as in Nasruddin's famous "duck soup" joke.

The story goes that a kinsman came to see Nasruddin from the country, and brought a duck. Nasruddin was grateful, had the bird cooked, and shared it with his guest. Presently another visitor arrived. He was a friend, as he said, "of the man who gave you the duck." Nasruddin fed him well. This happened several times. Nasruddin's home became like a restaurant for out-of-town visitors. Everyone was a friend at some remove of the original donor of the duck. Finally Nasruddin became exasperated. One day there was a knock at the door and a stranger appeared. "I am a friend of the friend of the friend of the man who brought you the duck from the country," he said. "Come in," said Nasruddin. They seated themselves at the table, and Nasruddin asked his wife to bring the soup. When the guest tasted it, it seemed to be nothing more than warm water. "What sort of a soup is this?" he asked the Mulla. "That," said Nasruddin, "is the soup of the soup of the soup of the duck."

Jim Simkin, whose best wisdom was usually expressed in the form of humor, once addressed the same phenomenon through the story of a lady who goes to a rabbi requesting a "broche" for a Christmas tree. Very orthodox, he excused himself from involvement with something so idolatrous as the blessing of a tree, and suggested asking the rabbi of a reform congregation. He, in turn, declined and recommended another, a rabbi of a new age congregation. When the lady formulated to him her request for a "broche" on the Christmas tree, however, his

response was, "A Christmas tree? I have no objection—but what is a 'broche'?"

If something similar has happened with Gestalt Therapy, then it has not escaped what seems to be a historical law, observable in the unfolding of all social movements and even civilizations which, as Spengler, Toynbee, Sorokin and others have pointed out decades ago, have their springtime, their summer, their fall, and their winter seasons.

There is still another topic I want to mention, for without it, this retrospective on the history of "Gestalt after Fritz" would be incomplete. In addition to being a story of remarkable geographic and intracultural diffusion with rather unremarkable creativity, this has been a story of division—a division that originally reflected the distinctiveness of an East Coast and a West Coast network, but now permeates the world as the presence of two contrasting orientations.

This division of East and West was not truly a division of a whole into two, however, but the long-term consequence of an increasing opposition that Fritz Perls and his activity met on the part of his older associates, so that it may be said to have existed in seed-form in the split between Fritz and his collaborators, even while he was alive and while, after his sexagenarian crisis, he became established on the West Coast.

It is not surprising that those associates of Fritz who during the New York years competed intensely with him (as Simkin used to recall) became only increasingly competitive once Fritz embraced his late and anti-theoretical and intuitionist creed, when the words "bullshit" and "mindfucking" became prominent in his vocabulary and when he considered the Gestalt Therapy book of the fifties obsolete and sought new associates and relationships. It is easy to understand how they did not only respond to rejection with rejection but also, taking Fritz's West Coast triumph as a defeat, sought its (and his) invalidation.

Subtle and restrained in the expression of their disapproval in the course of Fritz's lifetime, after Fritz's death they have supported an increasing denigration of Fritz, as if wanting to bury him and to minimize his imprint in the annals of history—at least in the sense of taking away his preeminence vis-a-vis Laura Perls and Paul Goodman.

Public expression of this criticism has brought about a sort of counter-reform or "restoration" period in the history of Gestalt, already ushered in when Paul Goodman had the bad taste of criticizing Fritz at the memorial celebration that the New York group took the initiative of "celebrating" a little after the one that took place at the Masonic Auditorium in San Francisco in the days following Fritz's passing. The chief landmark in the expression of such criticism has been Isadore From's *Requiem for Gestalts* and an interview on his training with Fritz where he claims that Fritz had not been able to provide Gestalt Therapy with a theory, while Paul Goodman did accomplish it⁶. It is my impression that Dr. From has not only sided with his brother Paul against his oedipal rival, but implicitly claimed authority as Paul Goodman's representative among the living.

Since then one can see that a subtle rewriting of the Gestalt Therapy history has gradually unfolded through the pages of the *Gestalt Journal*. Fritz has been made to look as if in becoming somewhat of a hippie he had lost seriousness; and as if his dedication to group workshops had been mostly an expression of his narcissistic need and lack of caring. He has certainly been criticized for not continuing to be interested in theory, and very unjustly accused of relying excessively on techniques. People even started

5 "Reflections on Gestalt Therapy after Thirty-Two Years of Practice: A Requiem for Gestalt." *The Gestalt Journal*, Spring, 1984, Issue #74.

6 Joe Wysong, *An Oral History of Gestalt Therapy: Interviews with Laura Perls, Isadore From, Irving Polster, Miriam Polster and Elliott Shapiro* (Highland, NY: The Gestalt Journal Press, 1988).

saying here and there—in books and in articles—that Fritz didn't practice therapy in California. If you read about it you find that he only *demonstrated* Gestalt Therapy, he didn't *do* therapy. In sum, the coming to fruition of Fritz's genius has been presented to the "official world" as an intellectual and moral decadence.

As I have mentioned, when I was first asked by Riccardo to speak of "Gestalt after Fritz" I was not excited about it. Since then I have read everything that has been written on Gestalt in preparing for this; I have re-read every line of Paul Goodman (whose formulation I never appreciated very much, and which I find full of mystification), and as a result I have developed a real motivation to talk about it. It has become clearer than ever to me that Gestalt—which once originated as a revolutionary movement—has developed an orthodoxy. Max Weber observed that in the history of every religion there is a transition from a "charismatic stage" to a "bureaucratic stage." When the established church condemns those who don't abide by the "holy book," the bureaucratic stage has already arrived. Isadore From's contention is that the (charismatic) Gestalt of the West Coast is endangering the movement—yet we know that the real danger to every movement lies not in its flexibility but in its fossilization.

Unfortunately, I am told that my time is up, which doesn't allow me to document what I have said as much as I would have liked. I hope, however, that the older gestaltists in my audience will feel that my words are particularly supported by the obvious yet increasingly obscured fact that the personal story of Fritz Perls was one of ongoing evolution, and that his work, after migrating to the West Coast, far from being degenerate, was his ripest. Perhaps the fact that West Coast gestaltists have not felt the need to create an institution constitutes a tribute to Fritz's taoistic spirit and his faith in spontaneous unfolding.