

Author's Introduction

Sometime in 1966 I was approached by Michael Murphy on the lawn in front of the Esalen Big House with a request for an article on Gestalt Therapy that he wished to publish (and eventually did publish) as an Esalen monograph. He had recently approached Fritz Perls, who suggested that he ask me to do it instead. I had at the time taken part in several workshops with Fritz and he had become very fond of me—to the point of granting me a permanent scholarship to his Esalen activities. I accepted with pleasure, and the result was my first piece of writing in English—which in retrospect I understand as a blessing, for through it I discovered that I could express myself more easily than I had thought.

Nothing had been published on Gestalt therapy at the time, except for Perls' two early books, some articles of his and a short statement from Van Dusen claiming that Gestalt therapy is the most consistent therapeutic application of phenomenology. Two additional papers circulated in mimeographed form in those days (while I attended Perls' and Simkin's first professional training workshop at Esalen) — one by Simkin and another by John Enright. (Both have since appeared in proper chronological sequence, along with mine, in Stephenson's *Gestalt Therapy Primer*¹).

¹ *Gestalt Therapy Primer: Introductory Readings in Gestalt Therapy*, F. Douglas Stephenson, ed. (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1975).

I carried out the assigned task with much satisfaction, since I had been keenly aware of how difficult it was to imagine Gestalt therapy in action from the reading of Perls' two early books. Through a caprice of destiny I had been among the first readers of *Gestalt Therapy* . . . , when the book was published by Julian Press in the fifties, for it had been sent by the publisher to my uncle Ben Cohen, co-founder of the U.N. who lived, of course, in New York. My uncle, being Under-Secretary for Press and Information, was constantly receiving many books from many sources, and occasionally forwarded to me those which he thought would especially interest me. It turned out that this particular one had considerable influence on my professional activity — though not as a therapist, but as a researcher and teacher; yet I must say that I imagined Perls through that writing (in spite of the exercises at the beginning of the volume) as a young intellectual rather than an old experientialist, and I was equally far from imagining the practice of Gestalt therapy. It now seems to me that Fritz had a genius for therapeutic interaction, but that he was neither gifted nor properly trained as a theorist, and that in his early years he relied heavily on theoretically inclined peers for the promotion of his therapeutic approach in an academic world dominated by psychoanalysis. Yet I think that Gestalt therapy always transcended the theoretical formulations about it, and that it came into its own when Fritz, later in his life, broke free from "elephant shit" and the need to validate his praxis through academic rationalizations.

Fritz, I believe, saw his work better reflected in my piece than in his early writings, for I never saw him so happy throughout the years of our friendship as on the day when he told me how much he liked it—not even when he felt that he had triumphed over Maslow at the memorable Esalen meeting at which he bit Abe's leg.

When Fritz was approaching his seventieth birthday and Jim Simkin invited contributions for a Festschrift in his honor, I wrote for it the paper called "Present Centeredness—Technique, Prescription and Ideal."² After reading it Fritz suggested that I put my two gapers (and perhaps some further contributions, along with articles from other contributors) together as a book. In spite of my enthusiasm for Arnold Beisser's "Theory of Paradoxical Intention" and Bob Resnick's "Chicken Soup is Poison" I was slow in carrying out the project. When I saw Fritz again, after a year or so in Chile, he told me he had in the meantime suggested to the "Miami girls" (Fagan and Shepherd) to bring out such a collection, and stimulated me to write a Gestalt therapy book of my own.

I don't think I would have undertaken the task of this book without such stimulus; writing about somebody else's creation would have competed for what time I had for writing about what seemed more personal work; also, I think I felt that anything I could say beyond what I had already written might seem too obvious. In the course of the years, however (after reading what has been published since Fagan and Shepherd's *Gestalt Therapy Now*) I have the impression that what seemed obvious to me was not so obvious to others.

Except for its first two chapters, *Gestalt Therapy: The Attitude and Practice of an Atheoretical Experientialism* was written in the weeks that followed Fritz's death in 1970. Since I was at Fritz's memorial service in San Francisco when my only son died in a car accident in the Big Sur Hills, this writing was done at a time of deep mourning, and the fact that I chose to undertake it conveys how significant it was for me at the time to complete this piece of "unfinished business." In the first place, this was a time when I was

²Included in Fagan and Shepherd's *Gestalt Therapy Now*.

getting ready for a journey which, as I have explained in the introduction to *The Healing Journey*, I thought would be without return. I had decided to join a spiritual teacher in an attitude of total availability and it seemed to me that I should pay my debts to my past so as to embark in a new stage of life without plans or obligations. The Gestalt Therapy book was one of my pending projects, and one which at Fritz's death seemed the appropriate one to tackle.

Even though the 1970 trip to the Chilean desert was in an inner sense indeed without return, I did come back to Berkeley in 1971 and offered the Gestalt Therapy book to Stuart Miller — then in charge of the Viking Esalen series, that had already published my earlier books *The One Quest* and *On the Psychology of Meditation* (currently titled, *How to Be*³). The manuscript would have been printed long ago if it had not been lost at a xeroxing place. Such has been the density of my life, both inwardly and outwardly, ever since, that it would have been preposterous to dig in old filing cabinets for the originals from which the book could be reconstituted. Only a portion of it was published as *Techniques of Gestalt Therapy*, first for the benefit of my Berkeley students, then as part of Hechter and Himelstein's *Handbook of Gestalt Therapy*⁴, and finally by *The Gestalt Journal*.

Yet at last I find myself at a time when the completion of the long-interrupted and postponed task becomes figure again upon the background of other projects. It is a time of harvesting again, as in 1969-1970, and one in which I am not only occupied with writing new books but with finishing the old ones.

³ *How To Be*, Claudio Naranjo (Los Angeles: Jeremy Tarcher, 1991).

⁴ *The Handbook of Gestalt Therapy*, edited by Chris Hatcher and Philip Himelstein (New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1990).

Along with chapters belonging to the earlier *The Attitude and Practice of Gestalt Therapy*, I am introducing under the title "Gestalt Therapy Revisited" a number of statements belonging to a time of return to psychotherapy after my not very long and yet deeply life-changing South American pilgrimage. While in the 1970 book I essentially spelled out my experience of Gestalttherapy with Perls and Simkin, the later batch of essays, though not of much volume, contains a more personal contribution: the underscoring of the transpersonal aspect of Gestalt, a critique of the "holes" in the approach, some illustration of later clinical work, a statement of my attitude in regard to therapeutic and training exercises along with some sharing from my "bag of tricks" and considerations on the affinity between Gestalt and some spiritual traditions. The first three of these pieces have already appeared in *The Gestalt Journal* (the second being an edited transcript of the opening address at the Baltimore Conference in 1981); two of the others originated as presentations at the 2nd International Gestalt Conference, in Madrid in 1987; while the chapter on Gestalt Exercises, a subject which I might consider one of my specialties, has been written expressly for this book. Shortly before going into print, I decided to include still another chapter—"Gestalt After Fritz"—that addresses itself to the history of the movement. It constitutes the edited transcript of a talk given at the Fourth International Gestalt Conference (in Siena, 1991) and is self-explanatory.

One thing has seemed incomplete in the present book even after the additions: my failure to have included, in my discussion of the implicit life philosophy of Gestalt, the issue of trust in organismic self-regulation. I have said that Gestalt is (on the patient's side) fifty percent attention and fifty percent spontaneity. I would also say that in "Techniques of

Integration" (Book One, Chapter 6) I have emphasized awareness over spontaneity.

Fritz's trust in individual self-regulation stands in contemporary psychotherapy as a contribution comparable to that of Rogers' trust in the self-regulation of groups: both have influenced psycho-therapeutic practice through a contagion of attitude transcending intellectual influence.

I have conducted a computer search for the appearance of the expression "organismic self-regulation" in the titles and abstracts of two hundred psychological and medical journals since 1966, and I think readers may be interested in knowing that the phrase does not appear a single time. It was certainly Fritz Perls who popularized the expression, and he used it in such manner that he seemed to be making reference to a well known concept. I think I have not been the only one of his listeners to assume that he was quoting Sherrington or Goldstein. The concept was certainly a familiar one to his listeners, and yet the implicit attribution of "organismic self-regulation" to the authority of the scientific establishment may have involved a shamanistic sleight of hand. Trust in organismic self-regulation is embodied in Gestalt therapy as a trust in spontaneity — which goes hand in hand with what I have called "humanistic hedonism" and is not a different issue but a biological translation of the existential one of "being oneself." In either case, what is meant is a living-from-within rather than a living-from-without-i.e., out of obedience to obligation or concern for self-image. The ideals of spontaneity and authenticity imply a faith similar to that of the indwelling perfection of Mahayana Buddhism and other spiritual traditions.

It seems appropriate that Fritz came into his own and was appreciated for what he truly was—in the nude, so to say—at Esalen Institute, a center created in part through the inspiration and support of Alan Watts and where one of the earliest community

members was Gia-Fu-Feng, who then covered many walls with his beautiful calligraphy and taught Tai-Chi and later gave us one of the modern translations of Lao-Tzu. These outer circumstances echoed an affinity of Fritz with Taoism which was reflected in his life and work. When Fritz said "organismic self-regulation" he also meant "Tao" at least in the sense of "the Tao of man," which the Taoists distinguish from the supraindividual "Tao of Heaven"; a course of appropriate action dictated by deep intuition rather than reason (and involving a Dionysian yielding to preferences rather than a Sartrean striving for choices).

In his allegiance to organismic self-regulation Perls was not only an inheritor of Freud, who first pointed out to us the vicissitudes of repression, but a continuator of Wilhelm Reich (his analyst), who was the first to believe in instinct more than in present civilization. By default of a chapter on organismic self-regulation in this book I have wanted to highlight the issue in this introduction, and feel pleased that in so doing I have touched upon the subject before and not after the subject of awareness—as befits the unique manner in which it is emphasized in the Gestalt approach as well as the predominantly Dionysian quality of the Gestalt ethos.

While I have grouped together as a "theory" my statements on the primacy of attitude over technique (Chapter 1) and my discussion of present-centeredness (Chapter 2), I have deliberately refrained from calling my early book *The Theory and Practice of Gestalt Therapy*. The choice, rather, of *Gestalt Therapy: Attitude and Practice* implicitly reflects my view that Gestalt therapy has not arisen as the application of a body of theory (that might be called its foundation) but is, rather, a matter of being in the world in a certain way.

Of course we can spell out Fritz Perls' psychological outlook (it is primarily in *his* outlook

that I am interested) and in so doing we may find a certain view of the ego as a factor of internal interference—in *Ego, Hunger and Aggressions*—and as an "identification function"; we find certain ideas about the self and contact—in addition to the open systems view of an organism in the environment and the holistic Gestalt approach. Even though we can find all this and more, I conceive of Fritz's psychological ideas as a context of his work rather than as a foundation, an explication rather than a skeleton. Because of this, when I defined Gestalt Therapy on the occasion of presenting Esalen and Herbert Otto with my "I and Thou Here and Now" in the mid-60s, I avoided a conceptual definition (as was noted by a reviewer in *Etc.: The Journal of General Semantics*) by simply pointing to it as "the approach that originated in the work of Fritz Perls."⁶

When in the late 60s I was searching for a better understanding of the "theoretical foundations" of Gestalt, I appealed to Gene Sagan (about whom Fritz was greatly excited in the early 60s and who constituted the link to Esalen Institute). He refreshingly told me that he thought that Gestalt therapy had more in common with the Stanislavsky method of acting than with Gestalt psychology. I continue to agree with him. I also shared at the Baltimore conference my view that Fritz sought intellectual support in Gestalt psychology at a time when he was in need of intellectual support against the academic world.

Far from being adverse to theory, I have professed criticism in face of Fritz's anti-intellectual orientation, inherited by many. Yet I think that the theory that Gestalt therapy might need (if any) will

⁵ *Ego, Hunger and Aggression*, F. S. Perls (New York: Random House, 1969).

⁶ "Contributions of Gestalt Therapy." In *Ways of Growth: Approaches to Expanding Awareness*, edited by Herbert Otto and John Mann (New York: Grossman, 1968)

not be the collection of Fritz's personal beliefs, such as "anxiety is excitement minus breathing" or "to die and to be reborn is not easy"—however insightful many of these may be. What the psychotherapist could draw most benefit from is a conceptual frame of reference to the understanding of the psyche and the growth process not so provincial as a specific Gestalt theory. At least, personally, I am more interested in a theory of health and sickness (that is to say, more ambitiously: a theory of enlightenment and endarkenment) that would bring together not only the inspiration of Gestalt psychology but what we know of conditioning, psychodynamics and, beyond that, the contribution of the Eastern spiritual traditions.

Less ambitious than such a comprehensive undertaking and still more relevant than Paul Goodman's attempt in the mid-50s (the "Gestalt theory" embraced by today's emerging Gestalt orthodoxy) would be a "theory of Gestalt therapy"—an enterprise comparable to the theory of psychoanalytic therapy that has recently emerged as an alternative endeavor to the psychoanalytic theory of the mind. Of this I have spoken in this book without making it its foreground, and my view can be summarized in the formula:

$$\text{Gestalt therapy} = (\text{Awareness/Naturalness} + \text{Support/Confrontation}) \text{ Relationship}$$

or in other words: the therapeutic process rests, on the patient's side, on the two transpersonal factors of awareness and spontaneity; while the therapist contributes to it (as I discuss under Gestalt Techniques) the stimulation and support of genuine expression and negative reinforcement ("ego reduction") of the pathological. To the extent that psychotherapy may be learned, this activity of eliciting genuine expres-

sion and confronting the dysfunctional constitutes strategy; to the extent that therapy derives from the degree of development of the therapist's being, both of these will be the spontaneous outcome of uncontrived relationship and individual creativity.