

GESTALT IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

by Gaie Houston 1999

BACKGROUND

Indivisible from Gestalt as a figure in this country in the early Seventies was a field formed of a compost of the previous half-century or so. One underlying valence was the uncomplaining acceptance that was a cultivated virtue in the war and for many years afterwards. Food was rationed until into the fifties. The word Austerity was applied to clothes, goods, new buildings in a way that made the words ugly, inconvenient, cramped, become somehow deeply enmeshed in the larger adjective Good. Behind the conformity and submissiveness and good-hearted matiness of those years lay the Depression that had trailed through the Thirties. In many families the constant preoccupation was with being careful with money, and appearing respectable.

Into this background came the eruptions of the Sixties, popularly symbolised here by The Beatles. In that context these four young men were an electric storm, sending shocks in all directions. Long hair on men! Music and lyrics that were both anarchic and beguiling; drugs; gurus; unashamed sexuality; interviews in bed; all these were behaviours outside the imaginings of many members of the fascinated public, before these four young iconoclasts tramped across the brittle and uncomfortable fixed gestalts of much British culture at that time.

In the more specific field of mental health, Wilfred Bion and others had discovered and written up the therapeutic effects of self-managed treatment. R. D. Laing had founded the Philadelphia Society and residential centres where the roles of sick and well, patient and professional, were largely left undifferentiated. His books licensed many people to question the very existence of mental illness. To those of us who were working in mental institutions, this allegation seemed to carry its own insanity. But at this time such brilliant psychiatrists as Maxwell Jones revealed the iatrogenic complications of much mental illness. New awareness was flooding into stagnant pools of old practice and belief.

GESTALT AS EMERGENT FIGURE IN THE UK

What is now often called the Sixties culture seems to a great extent to have come about in the Seventies. Near the beginning of this decade Gestalt workshops began to show significantly here, notably though not only via two separate sources. One was Peter Fleming, who trained with Fritz Perls and Janet Lederman, and, influenced by Dave Pellin's Contribution Therapy and Activator Philosophy, moved from innovative Gestalt work in Vancouver's prison service, to doing workshops in this country and the States, and setting up the Pellin Institute in Southern Italy.

A consultant psychiatrist, Richard Tillett, writes: "I first

came across Gestalt when Peter Fleming was invited to run a workshop where I was training in psychiatry, and I subsequently organised and attended a series of weekend training workshops which he ran in Bristol and Somerset. As a psychiatric trainee I was fascinated by the difference between Gestalt and conventional therapies, and in particular the emphasis on awareness and experience rather than cognitive process. I was very impressed by Peter's craftsmanship as a therapist - slow-paced, containing and undramatic but obviously highly effective."

Peter Fleming ran workshops for The Churchill Centre in London, which offered a Gestalt training. He also ran an intensive course in Italy over the summer months each year. Here, Anna Farrow writes, she and Carol Siederer attended, and in 1980 set up the Pellin Centre in London, using Fleming as their consultant and supervisor. Then he himself brought a branch of the Pellin Institute to London.

An important focus of the new Encounter Movement was an organisation called Quaesitor, in North London. Here, among a large number of American and other trainers, Larry Bloomberg conducted often crowded weekends and weekly groups that were to lead to more profound therapeutic training, as well as being for many Britons their first experience of Gestalt. Whether honoured in the breach or the observance, he has remained a major influence in British Gestalt, so a little needs to be said about him.

Larry, soon to be known as Ischa Bloomberg, was an American who had been in therapy and then trained for six years with Laura Perls. He had a Ph.D. in clinical psychology, which he did not speak of as an asset. From that or quite other causes, he was extraordinarily shrewd and quick in his understanding of people he spoke to or worked with. Helen McLean writes of his grasp of the psychological essence of the process. Fritz Perls has been described in a similar way.

Ischa had a strong interest in community, and had worked in community development with New Mexican Indians. In Albuquerque he founded a Gestalt-based children's school which is still running. He also had extensive clinical experience with schizophrenic and other profoundly psychologically troubled people, having worked under Leopold Bellak in earlier days.

These two interests showed in particular ways. The attention to the individual was the basis of the way he trained. The group was the setting in which his seemingly tireless and brilliant one-to-one work took place, often at the group member's request, sometimes at Ischa's instigation. The dynamics of the group were rarely made figural in the days when he was working in the United Kingdom. Transferential issues were not attended to. The author still recalls with a mixture of glee and terror the moment when she said in one of Ischa's groups that he seemed to behave like a monarch, and most of the group members like courtiers suing for favour. Certainly

extreme disfavour of the author followed this disclosed image. And yet Ischa had no truck with collusion. He seemed to have favourites and anti-favourites; but this interfered in no way with his remorseless pursuit and scouring out of pride, pretence or neurosis. Robert Hall, his later collaborator and creator of the complementary and gentler Lomi Method, once described Ischa's work as surgery without the anaesthetic. If it was, it was brilliant and effective surgery.

The interest in community made him see Gestalt as an aware, self-responsible, markedly independent way of life rather than just a therapeutic method. It was also behind his setting up of the network organisation, Gestalt Training Services. The notion was that groups of trainees should organise themselves locally, and then hire Ischa and the many talented international trainers he included in GTS. This was profoundly innovative, quite different from putting up an advertisement for a pre-structured event, as happened at Quaesitor and analogous organisations, and which happens in many trainings today.

By 1977 GTS was servicing training programmes in London, Edinburgh, Berlin, Amsterdam, Rhineland and Hamburg. Potential students had to negotiate terms and times and conditions with Ischa, who drove hard bargains. Nor would he hand out certificates, or set up certificated courses. He said, "If you are training for a certificate then you are not asking for a Gestalt training."

Anti-psychiatry and anti-professionalism were values in the field at that time, so this stance was acceptable, as was his Perlsian categorisation of theory as bullshit and elephants' shit. Alongside this it needs be said that he read eagerly and widely, and discussed ideas and methods from all schools with great, if bigoted, acumen, in the interstices of residential events. He also invited practitioners of different persuasions to work alongside him, thus modelling an ecumenical Gestalt which in some ways foreshadowed the Integrative Psychotherapy being actively developed in this country in this decade by Petruska Clarkson and many others.

Until three years before his death in 1996 Ischa had continued his work from Vignalino in Italy. Lomi Bodywork and meditation became part of the training, with a new attention to the complex field, group dynamics and multi-causality rather than just individual responsibility. He even co-operated with those trainees seeking State recognition for his training. He remained highly critical of pseudo-professionalism in psychotherapy, of those ethical standards he saw as pseudo or irrelevant, and of inadequate training programmes through which trainees would, in his eyes, come to know nothing but know about everything. All this is greatly at odds with the political climate influencing Gestalt Therapy in the UK now.

UKCP

The strongly skills- and intuition-based, anti-academic

training methods followed by Bloomberg and others in the Seventies have been changed profoundly by the Treaty of Rome requirement for nationally recognised training standards in psychotherapy.

As a response to this European Union requirement, the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy, the major professional body here, has been set up after many years of consultation, to regulate psychotherapy and training right across the board, from analysis to the body therapies. A number of Gestalt training organisations were party to these often dramatic consultations and negotiations. So Gestalt Therapy is now within the establishment, part of UKCP, in a way that probably makes Fritz Perls' ashes spin. The change is enormous. In short it is from iconoclasm, idiosyncrasy, and contact as a primary value, to conformity, Codes of Ethics, Complaints Procedures, and bureaucracy. This is the present field in which millennium Gestalt has its becoming. A concomitant is a huge increase in complaints to UKCP about practitioners in all schools. In many cases, the more in the rare ones which proceed to litigation, the psychological effects of the process on plaintiff and defendant look from the outside to be a good deal more embittering and diminishing than were the rough old-style Gestalt principles of self-responsibility and dealing in the present.

There is a tension between the polarities of national conformity and personal creativity, between self responsibility as a

guiding belief, and the clinical expertise that judges when protection of the other is an appropriate and not a neurotic response. The evidence is there in many fields that the more there is legislation against risk, and the more protection is put in place, the more abusive behaviour follows. If there was an obvious middle ground for Gestalt practitioners, between these polarities, then it would have been established by now.

The requirements of UKCP include much that might be expected in the way of many hundreds of hours of training, personal therapy, practice and supervision. They also ask that trainees are familiar with more than one accepted theoretical frame. So there is a full circle. The early Gestalt Therapists had backgrounds, like Perls, in Freudian and post-Freudian theory. But what they could protest to be irrelevant, even as it evidently informed their work, has now become mandatory learning. Revisionism has also slid in. One beauty of Gestalt Therapy is that it is based on a process theory, far freer of determinism than many others. Nowadays DSM4 and other more Procrustean-bed theories are sometimes elided into Gestalt teaching, rather than clearly held as separate illuminators of human behaviour.

It is increasingly common for Gestalt training organisations in the UK to affiliate themselves with Universities, and prepare candidates for an M.A or M.Sc. alongside their Diploma in Gestalt Psychotherapy. What can be seen as a danger in this otherwise sound requirement, is that Gestalt students will

leave their senses and dwell only in their heads. The opposite was just as highly questionable. In its time it was the polarity created by over-intellectualism in psychotherapy. It is hard for Gestalt training organisations, in what seems a generally paranoid field, to agree a synthesis of heart and head. The struggle, though unacknowledged, often looks to be about showing as more analytic than the analysts, who have somehow been singled out as the carriers of psychotherapeutic respectability.

MORE GESTALT TRAINING AND INFLUENTIAL TRAINERS

A number of the survivors of Ischa Bloomberg's and GTS education have set up training establishments on their own account, sometimes through the organisations they had to bring into being for the purposes of engaging with GTS. The next paragraphs are about certainly not all, but a number of these, with brief comment on their ethos and development over the last twenty or so years.

SAGE, the Scottish training, originated with him in Edinburgh in the mid nineteen-seventies. In later years Roger Dalton, who left GTS, was an external trainer. To the Bloomberg tradition of highly confrontative intervention, with discounting of shame as a therapeutic issue, he brought a different influence. Spoken of as a large-hearted man who makes warm contact, his work can partly be characterised as attending to the functions of the

self, with his own Gestalt interpretation of object-relations theory.

Two strands of training have evolved in Scotland since the early SAGE groups under Hilda Courtney, Flora Meadows and John Whitley. In 1995 the Gestalt Trust was formed, as a direct descendant of the Bloomberg GTS training. Alongside this, Helen Kennedy and others of the next generation of trainers bought premises and formed the Edinburgh Gestalt Institute, which works in the newer Gestalt modes, through dialogue and with reference to field theory, and runs a four-year psychotherapy training programme.

In 1987 the Scottish Gestalt Association was formed, as a professional body not affiliated to any one training organisation. It was at first intended as a regulatory body, and it has a Code of Ethics. But it had not the resources to be able to handle complaints. Now its function is as a forum for Scottish practitioners, and it invites speakers and trainers for public events.

In England there are a number of trainings whose instigators started with Bloomberg. The largest is the Gestalt Centre, London, founded by Ursula Faussett. Peggy Sherno, a trainee from her time, later took over the running of the Centre along with another, Judith Leary Tanner. They were joined later by John Leary-Joyce, who had trained with Ischa at SAGE. Often employing the author as well, the training expanded from its first focus on individual

personal development within a supportive setting. Now there is raised awareness of the group as field, indivisible from any one member. Group process and clinical diagnostic skills are learned, with the modern attention to field theory and phenomenological dialogue as well as the traditional creative experiments. Perhaps in reaction to early charismatic leaders, the Centre is notably unflamboyant in its leader style, a fact which catches awareness in a training field with more than its ration of colourful characters. The Centre is a member of the Humanistic and Integrative Section, [HIPS], of UKCP, now runs a five-year part-time Diploma in Gestalt Psychotherapy, with an MA alongside, as well as Gestalt Counselling courses and a variety of short courses. Joel Latner, Gary Yontef, Sonia Nevis are among the familiar recurrent overseas visitors to the Centre, while Carl Hodges recently spent a year as a full-time visiting staff member.

In Cambridge Helen McLean runs Cambridge GATE, a smaller organisation which keeps its character partly through the strength and creativity of Helen and her guest trainers, and partly through her practice of running mixed year training groups, with extensive use of peer groups and assessment in a strongly experiential training looking to developing the whole person rather than just turning out therapists. "I determined that the best ingredients of group analytic and Gestalt trainings should be incorporated" writes Helen of GATE. The same influence of the respected Institute of Group

Analysis, where she trained, therefore comes into the Cambridge, as well as the Gestalt Centre London training. She stayed in post-graduate training with Ischa Bloomberg in Italy, and the meditation-influenced mode he came to informs her own work. She distrusts the current institutionalisation of Gestalt, and writes: "I think this demand for control and standards is a movement based upon fear and in the service of the exploitation of therapy practitioners and clients for the pursuit of economic gain and self aggrandisement".

What was the English Gestalt Centre in Leamington, now called Gestalt Education Midlands, was begun by Barrie Hinksman, an ex-Tavistock Bloomberg trainee, and Renate Becker, who also trained with GTS. Since 1995 GEM, now run by Dr Becker and Faye Page, a clinical psychologist trained at the Churchill Centre and in California, with John Staude, Richard Bandler and others, has allied itself with Helen McLean's Cambridge training, under the umbrella organisation, Gestalt Education. This is intended to lead to access to UKCP registration for those GE graduates who want it.

In Devon in the deep South of England, Andrew Forrester is another Bloomberg-trained practitioner. He runs the Centre for Humanistic Psychology and Counselling in Exeter, which offers Diplomas in Gestalt Therapy and Gestalt Counselling, with David Kalisch. David was trained by Richard and Miriam Dror, a couple who brought Gestalt to the South-West of England at

much the same time that Ischa was working.

During the Seventies Laura Perls ran workshops here, hosted by the London Gestalt Centre and others. Isadore From, who called Gestalt Therapy a kind of plumbing job, also visited, and has provided a marked contrast to the work of his near-namesake Marty Fromm and her intense hot-seat training. Since 1970 she has continued to be an annual visitor to Spectrum in North London, another UKCP recognised psychotherapy training which offers a Gestalt programme.

Valuable Gestalt models have visited this country from the States since the early days. George and Judith Brown came yearly to the Psychosynthesis Trust. Elaine Kepner from Cleveland did some workshops at the very beginning of the Eighties. Miriam and Erving Polster have been guests at Metanoia for the last eight years, as have many international figures. Lynne Jacobs, Bud Feder, James Kepner, Joseph Zinker and many more are in the wide spectrum of Gestalt personalities and approaches from the States which continue to inform British Gestalt. To those who have met them, the names of any of the people mentioned here evoke a sense of the highly idiosyncratic quality of contact, the between called into being by the reader and that person. Perhaps those are the realities of different Gestalt influences, more than any stated or written theoretical nuances.

Elaine Kepner did a workshop here around 1980 with the author and a British student at Cleveland, Malcolm Parlett, who soon afterwards established a practice here and brought his own strand of Gestalt, with more reference to theory, specially field theory, than had been common here, and with more bodywork. His influence has been notable, not only for his training in what has become the independent and flourishing training body, Gestalt South-West, but for being part of the small group which set up the Gestalt Psychotherapy Training Institute. Marianne Fry was a GTS former trainee who joined Gestalt South West, and was part of the group which set up GPTI with Malcolm and the principal Metanoia trainers. This organisation offers its own respected qualification by several routes, one of them a Diploma in Psychotherapy, usually after five years. Only GPTI - accredited trainers are recognised in this training.

Until UKCP established its rigorous criteria for a qualification in psychotherapy, GPTI awarded the only Gestalt accreditation which spanned more than one organisation in this country.

Malcolm is also the editor of The British Gestalt Journal, which since 1991 when Ray Edwards founded it, has brought a level of continuing education, of academic respectability and informed debate to the British Gestalt world which is a far cry from the jolly but disreputable early Seventies. With Richard Tillett he also began the biennial British Gestalt Conferences in 1985. These continue, annually

now, and have retained some early features, such as daily small group meetings for all participants, while innovation is encouraged by the rotation of organisers and venues through Scotland and England.

Yet another strand of Gestalt training came to London in the early Eighties, with the arrival from South Africa and its own, to some extent Los Angeles-influenced Gestalt movement, of Petruska Clarkson and Maria Gilbert, who with others set up Metanoia. This comparatively large, now UKCP as well as GPTI organisation does not specialise only in Gestalt, but gives a thorough training in it. From its inception it gave more attention to history, clinical theory and written work than was common in many other British trainings at the time it started. It now runs, among many courses, a Gestalt M.Sc./Diploma in Gestalt Psychotherapy, in conjunction with a University. Metanoia has been influential in taking Gestalt philosophy and methods into many professions and organisations.

Petruska Clarkson, no longer at Metanoia, has been a prolific writer in the field as well as a trainer, speaker and practitioner. Her book Gestalt Counselling in Action was formative in helping British understanding of the more Yontef than Perls tradition of dialogue as a therapeutic method. Many trainings now teach this as a first method, from which other experiments may arise, [but at worst hardly ever do].

Second-generation training organisations have been set up

by Metanoia graduates. Among those offering a GPTI qualification is the Manchester Gestalt Centre with Peter Philippson. The Sherwood Institute in Nottingham under Ken Evans is a member of UKCP. It offers a four-year part-time MA in Gestalt Psychotherapy, as well as the range of counselling, supervision and other courses typical of larger training organisations here. Both these trainers are active internationally and are known by their writing and conference presentations in Europe and America.

The Los Angeles School European training has a number of students in this country, and has been a welcome extension. In this context the author recalls that Carl Hodges when he was working here made the valid observation that many of our Gestalt students and trainers give little attention to the provenance of strands of theory. What comes from the States is sometimes seen as monolithic, so the Cycle of Awareness is attributed to Perls rather than Zinker and the Cleveland School, for example. Perls and Bloomberg were apparently far more interested in effective intervention than correct attribution. But academic niceties become more figural in the present somewhat undignified and desperate scramble for respect and recognition.

This brief account has not mentioned every Gestalt training programme on offer here, nor every influential trainer or writer in an increasingly written-up field.

Jennifer Mackewn, for example, needs to be acknowledged for her books. Owen and Joan O'Leary are remembered gratefully by some for their enlarging of Gestalt training to the political as well as the personal sphere. Many others remain undisclosed background here, while to some readers they will be importantly figural.

GESTALT IN THE WIDER CULTURE

Gestalt methods are often to be seen, and occasionally even acknowledged, in the contemporary practice of therapists from many schools. As well, there are pockets of Gestalt Therapy in our National Health Service, some through the influence of such enthusiasts as Dr Richard Tillet and the training events he set up over many years for Health Service professionals.

As another example, on the South coast Jackie Clements, who first trained in Gestalt with the author, has run programmes for doctors in general practice. These started in 1981 as one-year courses. By 1985 a third of all General Practitioners in Brighton and Hove had been through her training. In that year she changed to slow open Gestalt groups for doctors, one of which continues until now. In consequence of these groups, Gestalt counselling has been introduced into many GP practices in that area. As well, Gestalt is taught in the local psychotherapy and counselling training. One GP, Jeremy Vevers, has in his surgery set up a series of Gestalt groups for somatising patients, which

have been researched by Sussex University and show very encouraging outcomes.

Ed Nevis has supported training in Gestalt with organisations, through Metanoia particularly. That body and the Gestalt Centre London are among those who offer organisational interventions, and training in Gestalt organisational consultancy. British Rail, many parts of the Health Service, the Social and Probation Services here, as well as manufacturing and service industries, are among the settings to be exposed to Gestalt philosophy and practice. But in the large world of organisational consultancy, Gestalt is only one of very many methods and approaches in use here.

A fair number of Universities and schools have Gestalt Therapy based counselling services. Some Universities and clinical psychology trainings include an element of Gestalt. The subject is usually very popular, minimally as a workshop series, on the myriad counselling courses to be found through the land. But it is hard to quantify the direct impact it has in general psychotherapy. The small Red Book of Gestalt, which was first published as two special issues of Self and Society, the Journal of Humanistic Psychology in 1981, and then as a handbook in 1982, has continued to sell an average of 2000 copies a year, and may be an indicator of the level of interest in the topic.

In the last dozen years or so a remarkable number of Books about Gestalt by British authors

have been published. There are too many to list in this small article. But a number have been translated, or appeared in English round the world, so may be familiar to readers. In the same way, articles on Gestalt by British writers have become comparatively common in psychology and psychotherapy journals outside as well as inside the Gestalt field, outside as well as inside the UK.

THE FUTURE

The tendency in this country has been to adapt to the professional climate by making Gestalt Psychotherapy the subject of qualification. An occasional rare alternative is a Diploma in psychotherapy of whatever persuasion, to which Gestalt is an addendum. However, it may be that student psychotherapists in this country will one day reach saturation of their tolerance for training. UKCP requires a remarkable number of training and practice hours before graduation. After that, 450 hours of clinical practice must be completed before a Diplomate or graduate can apply for registration. And, unless the new Labour government changes policy, there is a Department of Education intention to create a National Vocational Qualification for Psychotherapy, which will be post-graduate and post-practice. This is seen as the route to being funded for work within the National Health Service. More training; more exams; more writing up. The field is changing and we are changed within it.

The sense in writing this is of describing an implosion, a Titanic inner struggle between creativity and institutionalisation; between iconoclasm and conformity; between individual competitiveness and greed, and Goodman's visions of community and communitas; between professionalisation on one side, and excitement and growth on the other. The theory is that the underdog wins, and that explosion may follow implosion. So be it.

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