

## WHO IS TO BE TRAINED FOR WHAT - AND HOW ? by Gaie Houston, 2001

The philosophy of Gestalt Therapy is about excitement and growth, about contact and response-ability and what is called self-support, which I prefer to term autonomy.

But now, the requirements of institutions are what lead training, rather than the curiosity and energy of the student. Top dog does the barking. Underdog, it may be supposed, is tempted into underdog activities, while trying, suspicious word, trying to do as prescribed.

One way of restoring more excitement is to work with the student's priorities rather than an institution's requirements. If a diploma or degree is wanted, then there needs to be a convergence between the needs of the student and the awarding body. This need not involve mere lip service to self-directed learning. If the institution provides a framework of what it considers needs to be demonstrably covered in the training, and is open to some negotiation, students can design their own learning in their own ways. At this point in my argument, academics often hasten to tell me that they would love to show more flexibility, but that the accreditation bodies are terribly rigid. Well that is not always so. Their members tell me that they are open to all manner of academic proposals, provided that proof of the achievement of standards is offered. They say the academics are unoriginal in their suggestions.

Counting beans is easier than recognising lemons one from another. Measurable and measured knowledge and theory certainly need to be part of Gestalt training. An integration that is beginning and needs to strengthen, is that between the sciences, the knowledge so far as we have it of the biology of the emotions and of behaviour, with art. The art is the intuitive, the intimate, and the contactful, which cannot be fully replicated by anything except other human beings of goodwill. Either alone is not enough for the best therapy.

Š. learning to become a therapist involves theoretical knowledge, practical experience and personal development. By far the easiest to assess is theoretical knowledge, and this has traditionally been done through written work such as essays. It is more difficult, yet perhaps more important, to assess how the theoretical knowledge students have acquired helps or hinders their ability to practice. [O'Brien and Houston 2000:161]

In the seventies there was some experimentation with student-directed learning, particularly in Scandinavia, and to some extent in the United Kingdom. By the beginning of the nineties I was being called in to help University staff in Denmark to manage themselves and their apparently unmotivated self-directed students. Fifteen years before that we in this country had called in Danish and Swedish consultants to our extremely lively experiments in the same field.

Something retrograde appeared to have happened, indeed had happened. Instead of trusting students' capacity for excitement and growth, the Danish University I am recalling had prescribed a syllabus, timetable and outcome criteria on students, then told them to get on with it. They had not seen that this is not student-centred, but staff-imposed. In my experience students take to self-directed learning like ducks to water. Staff are more likely to be like the proverbial horses led to water, who will not drink. They need training to be reactive rather than impositional [Feder and Ronall 1996 pp279-293]. The Red Book of Gestalt, written in 1982, assumed self-directed learning in a group to be in line with Gestalt philosophy, and described methods to bring this about. In the decade before, Ischa Bloomberg required students to organise their own teaching, and hire him and others to do it.

The pity is that creeping academisation, which is at ease with the measurable, has led to a good deal of prescriptive training in Gestalt in this country, as well as to a confusing mix of concepts and terms from other schools of therapy. It is arguable that Gestalt counsellor psychotherapist training is best done, as in the United States, after a generic psychotherapy training that gives an understanding of the categories and pathologies which are valuable and necessary background knowledge for any practitioner. That these contain many notions which were inimical to Perls [and are still inimical to the best psychiatric

practice], is common knowledge in the Gestalt field.

### *Trained for what?*

What people are trained for when they get a diploma or degree in Gestalt Therapy is, to my mind, another strand worth separating. I recently wrote the following paragraphs, and see them relevant here.

### *Is Therapy Bad for Therapists?*

Some of the givens, the orthodoxy that has been adopted from older schools into humanistic practice, sit more and more oddly in my mind. You the reader, and I, can make a proper and convincing case about what are termed Boundary Issues. Of course you are not going to be buddies with these clients with whom you have a professional relationship, we might agree. And certainly it is a great convenience to the therapist to know that the dysfunctional powers of relating of some lonely but difficult client need only be attended to within the neat time frame of the therapy hours. Yet many people who come for therapy have had mixed messages about their acceptability, all their lives. They have been beamed at and then ignored, or they have been abused and then somehow encouraged to the strength that has brought them to the consulting room in the first place. I look to me as if the therapy can be construed as an ultimate mixed message, telling something about insight, care, parenting, attention and great openness, and then scissoring that off when the clock strikes.

Maybe we should do less

therapy. I become less convinced as I go along that therapy is all humanising. Parts of it seem dehumanising. I frown at supervisees who have hugged a client in a closed room. I agree with some clients that I will acknowledge them with a faint smile and no more if we meet by chance in public. I sometimes reach a place of great understanding and affection with a longer term client, then observe the no-social-contact-for-two-years advice and miss a wedding or party that is an important moment in their lives, and to which I am asked. What is more, I can get to be such a good listener that in social gatherings I am drowned in the deluge of other people's stories, and do not remember to tell my own. And I question all this.

### *Who is to be trained?*

My answer is everybody. This needs clarification. It looks as if people in this society are very interested in what makes us tick, and perhaps about ticking in ways more satisfactory than now. In Gestalt language, it looks as if hunger for good contact leads people in this age of specialisation to look for some theory and practice guidelines about getting on with each other. I would like the return of group therapy, or participative Gestalt groups with other titles, from the margins where it seems often to be at the moment.

I believe passionately that everyone should be given the opportunity of learning more of what is being discovered about social needs and skills. I believe and have over the years written as passionately,

like Ivan Illich, that these "skills should be returned to the laity". Probably the best time for them to be assimilated is in childhood, so I would like more and more Gestalt interventions in school systems, whether through staff groups which have as one outcome the training of the staff to run similar groups with children, or directly in class. Only some of us will use academic skills later in life. Everyone will be in contact with others for the whole of life. So there is where I see the most valuable part of Gestalt training best expressed, in working with as much of a population as possible. Contact groups, encounter groups, meeting groups, are a few of the possible titles that stress to participants and to leaders, the interpersonal emphasis of the work that might take place in them.

I would like a civilised society to be one in which everyone was helped into these skills of getting on with themselves and each other. With luck this might reduce the number of people who need to look for professional help with their troubles. They might have gained better insight and coping abilities in their group; their friends might have acquired the listening and empathic skills to be helpful confidantes.

Two levels of training are postulated here. One is what I have just described, for a large population of participants of many ages, where interpersonal and group level awareness is more to the foreground than intrapsychic distress. The other is the obvious training of trainers for

such work. Skills in working with children, students and a public who does not want to be designated sick needs to be available. It has an overlap with training in Gestalt group therapy, but is not the same.

Since work with individuals has become strongly the focus in much Gestalt therapy training, I end here by reminding any doubters of the advantages of the group. There are ways in which I believe group therapy is superior to one on one work, and I will recall one or two of these, as they seem so ignored and perhaps forgotten. One to one, the therapist is half the world, so her pronouncements may take on a somewhat overwhelming value for the client, the other half of this narrow universe. Most therapists, aware of this, temper the wind to the shorn lamb, and may even get to be namby pamby. In a group, spades can be named as spades or bloody shovels, and other voices will dispute what has been said. Reality is built in a larger way than in the pair. Besides, much vicarious therapy happens, as people see some of several lives, and can begin to find that they are better copers than they thought, or that there are different ways to perceive the world or their problem, or what all else that becomes available where there are a number of people being open with each other in a therapeutic setting.

And groups are cheaper to run per capita than pair therapy. This obvious fact is ignored in most of the scurrying after brevity of intervention in the name of saving money that happens now.

### *Professional training*

Who is probably even more important in selection for training than we judge it already. Prior training and academic ability have a place in selection. Empathic talent is perhaps even more important.

I suggest that one of the first requirements in anyone who seeks professional training to run Gestalt education groups, as those in school or college might be called, or to be counsellors or therapists, is a capacity for accurate empathy. Many qualities that help make a good therapist are easier to recognise than to measure, and so are less congenial to academics than the mastery of theory. But accurate empathy is not very difficult to assess. If that is present, the chances of a good match between person and profession are greatly enhanced. This needs to be said in this climate of galloping academisation.

What, stated simply, are the conditions necessary in any form of psychotherapy, for healing to take place? Frank offered this answer [Frank 1973]:

- an emotionally charged confiding relationship with a helping other,
- the arousal of hope
- encouragement of changed behaviour outside the session
- encouragement of new ways of understanding oneself
- a conceptual scheme or myth to explain symptoms
- a ritual to help resolve symptoms

To them I add the Gestalt notions of increased response-ability, self-support, autonomy.

Gaie Houston, 2001

©Gaie Houston 2001 All rights reserved

### REFERENCES

- Feder B and Ronall R. [1996] *A Living legacy of Fritz and Laura Perls*. New York: Feder and Ronall
- Frank J. [1973] *Persuasion and healing [2nd edn]* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press
- Harris J.B. British Gestalt Journal Vol.8 No 2: 85-95
- Illich I. [1976] *Tools for Conviviality*. New York: Calder and Boyers
- O'Brien M. and Houston G. [2000] *Integrative Therapy: a practitioner's guide*. London: Sage
- Palmer S and Varma V. Eds [1997] *The Future of Counselling and Psychotherapy*. London: Sage
- Perls F., Hefferline R. and Goodman P. [1951] *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* New York: Harper Row.
- Stern D. [1985] *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*. New York: Basic Books