

The Crazy Wisdom Interview with Peter Fleming on Gestalt Therapy and Contribution Training

Interviewed by Bill Zirinsky

What follows is a transatlantic interview with Peter Fleming, a brilliant and inspiring Gestalt Therapist who will be doing a public talk, and two one-day workshops, in Ann Arbor in March of 2006. Fleming, now 72, is one of the last of a breed of Gestalt therapists who radically altered the psychotherapy landscape in this country. The Gestalt therapists of the 1960's and 1970's opened up the therapeutic process, asking different questions and using different methods, from the traditional analysts who had held sway in the field, from the time of Freud. The Gestaltists believed in the "here and now" and they created profound and emotionally stirring tools to wake up therapists and clients, alike. All the body-mind therapies that have evolved since that time were deeply influenced by Gestalt Therapy. Gestalt work, when practiced skillfully, is very alive, very evocative, very powerful.

Born and raised in Australia, Fleming spent formative years in Los Angeles and in Vancouver. In Vancouver, he blended the cognitive tools developed by Fritz Perls, the iconoclastic founder of Gestalt Therapy, with the common sense "philosophy of living" of a grass-roots Canadian social worker named David Pellin. Fleming calls the blend "Contribution Training" and he's devoted his life to teaching it. In the early 1970's, he started the Pellin Institute, a residential Gestalt therapy institute, in southern Italy. He divides his time between a therapy practice in London, England, and summer programs that he leads at the Pellin Institute. At the Institute, psychotherapists and social workers develop and deepen their therapeutic skills while at the same time working on their own issues.

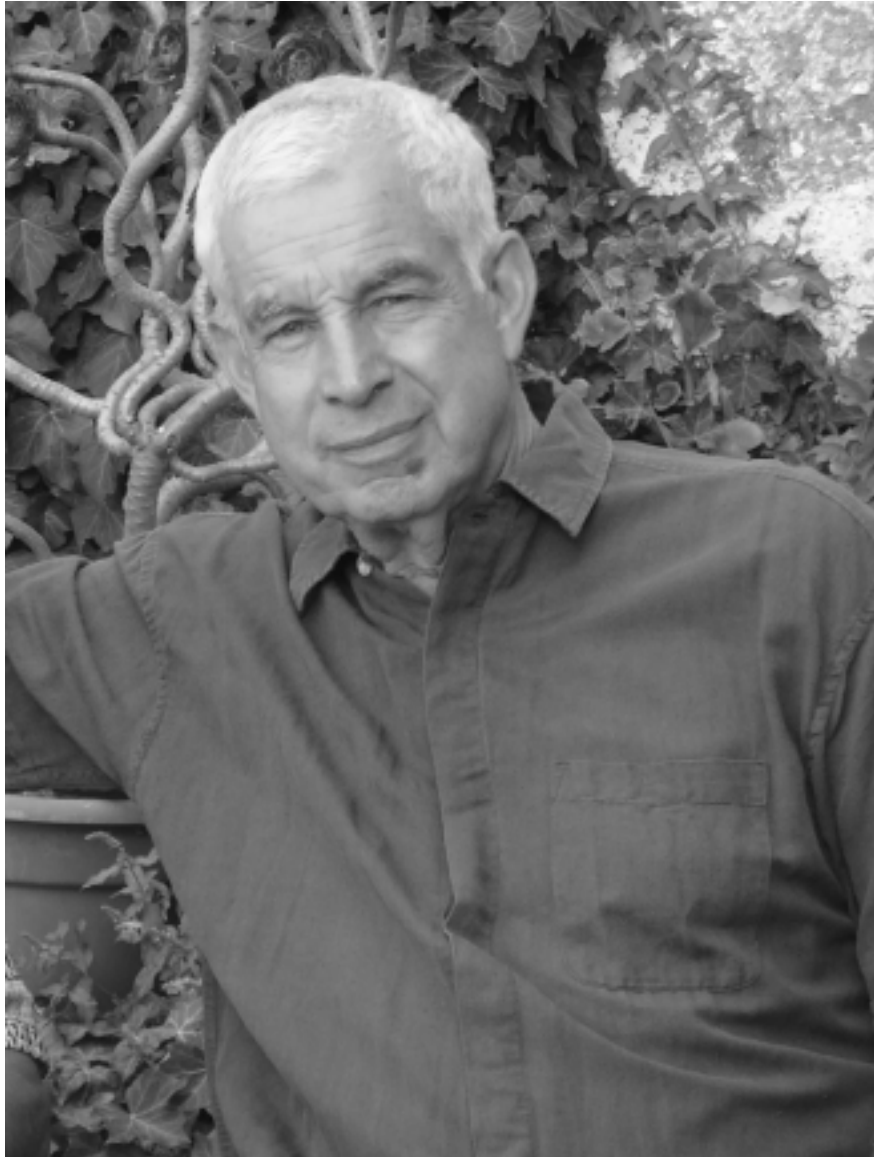
Fleming spent considerable time in Ann Arbor in the 1970's, leading workshops here. Many young therapists in this town, in that era, went to Italy to attend the Pellin Institute's 3 month and 6 month programs, and were deeply influenced by the teachings of Peter Fleming.

(The interviewer, Bill Zirinsky, attended the Pellin Institute in 1973. He and his wife, Ruth Schekter, are the long-time owners of Crazy Wisdom Bookstore.)

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Bill Zirinsky: Peter, you are an Australian, correct? What was your early training in, in terms of doing therapy with people? How did you come to work in Canada?

Peter Fleming: I spent the first 24 years of my life in Australia. Very happily. I joined the Commonwealth (Federal) civil service at 17, went to university at night, studying economics. On graduation I traveled overland from Australia to London to study at the London School of



Peter Fleming, one of the last of a breed of Gestalt therapists who radically altered the psychotherapy landscape in this country, is coming to Ann Arbor in March of 2006.

Economics.

There I met an American student who got me a summer job as a counselor at the Beverly Hills YMCA camp on Catalina Island, off LA. There I found my vocation. The next summer I ran the summer camp for the Glendale Y. I also worked as a research assistant on a Ford Foundation funded project researching adolescents at the University of Southern California (USC). That project was headed by Kim Nelson, who was a Canadian, and had set up a very advanced correctional facility in British Columbia — The Haney Correctional Institution (HCI). This had been his Ph.D. thesis. When my visa for the States ran out, I went to BC and got a job as a counselor and social worker at HCI. That was 1961. Just before I left LA for British Columbia, I had the fortune to shake JFK's hand while he was campaigning on the USC campus.

The years I spent at HCI, 1961 to 1966, were hugely formative. That is where I made my name as a diagnostician. And a therapist. I worked with social workers, psychiatrists, prison guards; and prisoners as clients and as providers of services. . We set up some of the earliest lay counseling training programs: Training prisoners to be counselors, enabling them to set up half way houses that they ran.

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) was a large influence. And still is. I did a deep although informal study of how and why AA was successful. That still influences my work in theory and practice: Transparency, Purpose, True Rest, and Contribution From Hurt, are all in part inspired and supported by AA and its off shoots: NA and GA and others. I still believe AA is the most successful therapeutic program in history. To claim my frankness at 72, I am staggered that the question of how and why AA works is not studied by professionals and academics. At times, I claim it is as if we were all using computers that were half

the size of a room. I can be a fierce, although I hope informed, critic of conventional approaches in my field.

Through my work at HCI (1961 - 1966) and later at the John Howard Society (a parole and after-care agency, 1966 -1971) in Vancouver, I met both David Pellin and Fritz Perls. The two key figures in the development of the Pellin organization and Contribution Training (CT). By the way it has never been Contribution "Theory", it has been "Contribution Training". In fact, until very recently, I have been opposed to theory and theoretical models. I am overcoming that lately in the interest of getting the material more accepted. For more than thirty years I have used the words Cognitive Tools and called Contribution Training a set of Cognitive Tools.

In 1969, I got the National Film Board of Canada to make an hour long documentary film about an avid man named David Pellin and his work, which is the philosophical and cognitive base of CT. He was killed in a pedestrian accident in Vancouver in 1971. That happened just before I left for Europe to set up my own training institute. I named the Institute after Dave Pellin. I also studied briefly with Fritz Perls before he died in 1970. And I continued to do Gestalt work after Perls died, at the Gestalt Institute he had set up at Lake Cowichan, on Vancouver Island in BC. Perls provided the practice of CT, as Dave Pellin provided the philosophy and ideas.

Bill Zirinsky: There was a time, 35 and 40 and 45 years ago, that Gestalt Therapy was very cutting edge. You became a Gestalt therapist in that era, and you've been an important Gestalt therapist for a very long time. Tell our readers more about how you came to be trained as a

Gestalt Therapist?

Peter Fleming: Dave Pellin was such a huge influence on me that I was looking for a balance. Also his work lacked ways to get into deep therapeutic processes. Fritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt Therapy, left America because of Nixon as he had left Germany because of Hitler and South Africa because of apartheid.

When he came to British Columbia, my boss at the John Howard Society, Merv Davis, was one of the local professional leaders who met him. Merv wanted me to consider training with Fritz. My reply was "Merv are you trying to

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tell me that any German shrink has anything to teach us?" It was the late 1960's and I was young and arrogant. I agreed to go to one of Fritz Perls' two-day workshops. I was immediately deeply impressed and inspired by his

talent and ability to get to the core of issues fast. Also, I felt his deep and informed experience, which resulted in Fritz having a suspicion of theory and professional models. **This to me gave his work the chance of tackling elitism and superiority in the helping professions.** I quickly committed myself to training in Gestalt, to taking it into prisons, and to developing an integration of the work of David Pellin and Fritz Perls. The result is Contribution Training.

Bill Zirinsky: Tell us about that earlier era in the practice of Gestalt Therapy.

Peter Fleming: The 60's and early 70's, particularly on the west coast of north America, were experimental, radical, wild. Fritz was always a person of his historical time. He became experimental, radical and wild. He incorporated almost anything that caught his eye or his fancy. He used elements of TA (Transactional Analysis) and was hurtfully jealous of Eric Berne's success. He used Viola Spolin's Theatre Improvisation extensively and never gave her any credit. He incorporated Zen and Taoism brilliantly to give spirituality to the practicality of the "Here and Now", the God-given present. He even wrote an introduction, which he later came to regret, for a book on Scientology. He struggled with politics and his own political history of always being able to escape and have success and security.

He was in his seventies a child of the 1960's. He created in my view some of the most effective therapeutic methods that have been developed. And as a child of the 60's he was indulgent and at times trained people not from the depth of his experience but in a loose, almost dangerous way. This was the fashion of the time and it led to people taking too many risks.

BZ: Are you still a believer in Gestalt therapy? What do you love about the Gestalt work?

Fleming: The belief I think now rests more with the ethics of Gestalt than the methods or techniques. I certainly still

healing power of humor to emerge.

BZ: In the group work which I did at Pellin Institute, thirty-two years ago, you often had a given group member do "a round" in which the member who was "working" on his or her issues would have an opportunity to intensify or crystallize or amplify the hot seat work by taking a piece of that hot seat work to the other (watching) members. Was that a technique that was widely used by Gestalt therapists? It is such a rich and exciting and meaningful way to work, don't you think?

Fleming: I still use and train people in the use of Rounds. I do not think they were much used by other Gestalt practitioners and maybe now hardly used anywhere outside of Pellin trained practitioners. I am not however sure of this.

We can use rounds with considerable ease because of two factors in Pellin work. The first is the strict and consistent practice for all of us in training group participants to listen deeply. The second is our use of feedback, which I believe is different than it was in the 70's. The combination of listening and feedback provides a safety with the rounds and also an opportunity to contribute with feedback, so Passive Listening to the round is not a restriction on group interaction.



The view from the Pellin Institute in Agropoli, Italy. Peter Fleming founded Pellin in the early 1970's, and has trained numerous Ann Arbor therapists at the Institute.

BZ: You were also trained many years ago,

by David Pellin, in Contribution Training. Would you describe that to our readers? Who was David Pellin, and what were his teachings about?

Fleming: David Pellin worked with young drops-out, addicts, street kids, in a skid row area of Vancouver in the 1960's. He worked with some of the hardened young criminals I had worked with at the Haney Correctional Institute. I met him through my boss, Merv Davis. David gave a series of twenty lectures on his "Activator Philosophy of Human Behavior". I turned that into "Contribution Training" to make it more accessible. One of my big passions and claims is that Contribution Training is accessible. Dave was untrained; he was not an academic. He was unusual, strange, at times outrageous. He was overweight, wall-eyed, overbearing, and in my view a genius. I have devoted my life to his thought.

His work is extraordinarily comprehensive. In fact, it is a Philosophy of Human Behavior, even though the phrase does not work because it makes him look like a charlatan because he knew nothing about academic philosophy.

And yet, and yet ... as I say this I realize it is time for me to move the work along and to find a way to make the claims that the combination of practicality and comprehensiveness he achieved deserves.

The work is about how people can solve problems; how healing comes from contribution, how unless we make contributions we will be inevitably pulled into hurting ourselves, hurting other or having others hurt us. It is also about sex and communication, and food and our social life.

It is about families and raising children. And above all else it is about how work and family, for all their satisfactions, may not be enough and how we need to have a nourishing and sustaining purpose in our life. Beyond work and family.

BZ: One aspect of the Contribution Training teachings that I most remember has to do with "the Pendulum". Would

you describe that for our readers?

Fleming: The Pendulum is a tool that can help us have the widest choices about what we want to do with our emotions. The Pendulum swings from Highs to Lows. The Highs can be Pleasant: happiness, enthusiasm, confidence, sex. Highs can also be Unpleasant: anger, embarrassment, fear, anxiety, panic, sex. Highs are extrovert, physical. In the High we want to reach out into the world. Lows are introvert, mental, inward turning. Lows are longer than highs. We can stay Low for a very long time. We can only be High for a limited time. Highs lead to Lows and Lows to Highs.

The Pendulum is a tool that that can be used to understand and control depression, help solve problems in marriages, enable us to sustain creativity and to become better lovers. There is no domestic violence without extreme Pendulum swings.

The Pendulum is a basic tool of Contribution Training. It is simple to understand, and with practice can provide sophisticated solutions to complex problems. Like much of CT the Pendulum has a resonance to common sense. (A diagram of the Pendulum is crucial here.)

BZ: In the early 1970's, you started the Pellin Institute, in southern Italy. Tell us about that.

Fleming: It opened in 1972. It was pipe dream. I have been running residential programs there for thirty-three years. People still say I do my best work there. We have been in three different buildings in that time. Now we own our own property just outside the town of Agropoli. On a clear day we look across the Bay of Salerno to the Amalfi coast. We are close to a sweet beach and to the Greek ruins of Paestum.

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use the methods and believe there is still much for me to learn. The ethics are in the belief that people always have deep wells of self-knowledge. It is our job to help them contact and use that self-knowledge. Gestalt enables us to do that without messing with them. These ethics also enabled me to combine Gestalt and AA into the Contribution Training concept of Transparency.

With Dave Pellin's notion of Transparency there is openness in the caring relationship. That openness protects integrity and creates trust and closeness. One love for me of Gestalt is that it always, always, ensures that a person is unique. Gestalt is above all else about detail. In the detail of the story, each of us can tell we are this person and not another person. We are not a diagnostic label. That for me is not just a love of Gestalt; it is after a bunch of years a passion. Another love is the beauty of the work when it is done well: the lightness that can be there with tragedy, the laughter that can be there with tears. I also love how demanding it is to do. The level of concentration is probably good for the elderly and I am 72.

BZ: What are the limitations of the Gestalt work?

Fleming: Gestalt .can be dangerous. It can get quickly to deep, hidden and secret issues in people's lives. Without concentration and continual practice of listening skills, both the practitioner and the worker (client) can get out of their depth.

It can also be an ego trip for the practitioner. In Contribution Training terms people get pulled into their Performance Life Force (what earlier in CT was called Vanity) and away from their Caring Life Force (Rejectiveness) which is crucial for ongoing trust and independence.

Gestalt lacks cognitive tools. It does not use the power that is in the intellect of the client enough, and that can mean the work does not achieve last nourishing change.

BZ: You are, in my estimate, a master at Group Gestalt work. It is very powerful work. What is it about Gestalt hot seat work that makes it so rich and meaningful in a group?

Fleming: I know no other method that so powerfully, and with concentration, safely uncovers people's wisdom about themselves and their circumstances. Chair work, as I now call hot seat work,

also can provide an opportunity for the worker (client) to take risks and still be in control. It also enables the huge

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Pellin Italy has grounded my life. Three of my four children were born there.

I have had more time in my home in Italy than anywhere else.

BZ: And you currently live in London. Do you have a private practice there? And a group practice, as well?

Fleming: I have recently moved from London after twenty years, and my wife, Brenda, and I now live in the cathedral city of Ely, in Cambridgeshire. Brenda has a considerable family in Cambridge, which is only half an hour away.

I still work in London two or three days a week. I have a practice, and run a training course, and with colleagues I am developing a program for young people who live in the part of the inner city where the Olympics are going to be held. The aim of the program is to teach a group of young

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Thursday, January 19

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Eric Van de Vort, Lucinda Kurtz

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Thursday, February 16

Ron Larson, Professor of Chemical Engineering, U of Michigan

END OF LIFE DECISIONS: FACING THE TERRY SCHIAVO DILEMMA

Thursday, March 16

Dr. Carl Schneider, Chauncey Stillman Professor of Law and Professor of Internal Medicine, U of Michigan

GROWTH FOR ANN ARBOR: TOO MUCH OR NOT ENOUGH?

Thursday, April 20

John C. Hieftje, Mayor of the City of Ann Arbor

Other speakers for all the above programs will be announced through e-mail and other publications.

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The Crazy Wisdom Interview with Peter Fleming (continued)



Peter Fleming and Ann Arbor therapist, Michael Andes. Andes is co-sponsoring Fleming's visit to Ann Arbor, along with Crazy Wisdom Bookstore.

people, 12-18, the tools of CT as well as film-making skills, so they can record their own journey to the London Games in 2012. The aim is also to train the young people to be the trainers. They in turn will be training their friends and families in CT and filmmaking. The program is called C2L, Contributing To London.

BZ: Much of your work has been about training psychologists and social workers and psychotherapists. Talk about your beliefs about the ingredients for good "people workers". After so many years of working with therapists, what is most important for you to convey to them?

Fleming: We need

to be able to combine modesty, (no one has all the truth), with the audacity to experiment. We need to give up the possessive certainty that our approach is right, and give up the adolescent competitiveness that can blight our professions. A search for and commitment to an accessible language always helps. I teach people to find a way to use what James Joyce called the whole person alive. Use all of you in your work and find a way to contribute from your hurt in your work. That is not easy. But it can be guaranteed to keep out the burnout blues.

BZ: Many of our readers have a strong interest in finding spiritual meaning in day-to-day life. Do your teachings these days have a transpersonal or spiritual component?

Fleming: CT does not directly have a spiritual component. Often people move on from CT onto a spiritual path and our tools reinforce that search. The closest we come to a direct spiritual component is the CT tool of True Rest, and in fact there may well be more of an opening into a spiritual direction through True Rest than I have realized.

BZ: The work which you do with people is very profound, very life changing. It's been over twenty-five years since I last saw you, Peter. How has your life been, over these many years? What have you been most satisfied by? What have you the deepest regrets about?

Fleming: I am lucky to be able to do work for which I still feel passion. I have had my own heartbreaks. I have had divorces and work failures. And satisfactions in seeing four children grow into good adults. I deeply regret not having written and published my work in book form.

My base in the Client region of southern Italy is a huge pleasure for my wife, Brenda, and myself. And the 117 olive trees I have planted. And yet after all these years my Italian is poco, poco.

BZ: What moves you? What stirs you?

Fleming: There are mistakes and pain and stupidity. There is evil. And I believe each of us can make a Contribution from our Hurt. That is the message from AA. That is what Dr King knew. That is what Nelson Mandela does. That is what New Orleans needs.

We all still have a chance. The world can be better, gentler, saner. I believe that. I believe there is a power in nourishing contributions that can accumulate and be self-generating between people, and I believe the tools of Contribution Training can provide a few very significant answers. With contribution we can have hope. And I believe young people can be taught how to make contributions that will work for them and work for their communities. There are whole bunches of good people out there.

"Above all else, Contribution Training is about how work and family, for all their satisfactions, may not be enough and how we need to have a nourishing and sustaining purpose in our life. Beyond work and family."