Contact and resistance

Good contact is the ability to be fully present with all aspects of ourselves – our sensing, emotional, intellectual, behavioural, sexual and spiritual being. It is not something that can be brought about through an act of will. To be in good contact one requires an open attitude and an awareness of one’s ability for resistance. How we make contact is through seeing and looking, touching and feeling, tasting, smelling, sound, gesture, language, movement – the ways in which we reach out to our world.

Gestalt therapy’s emphasis on contact can lead to misunderstandings, with a devaluing of resistance. Contact and resistance are part of the same continuum and both can be supports depending upon the situation. We are always in contact but we moderate the level of our contact through our ability to creatively adjust. Resistances can be seen as ways of self supporting and always need to be viewed in the context of the person’s situation. I do not want to be in full contact in an environment that is toxic. Likewise a surgeon will need to diminish her level of contact with her patient – open-heart surgery is best performed whilst minimizing emotional engagement! Resistance to contact has its place. The gestalt psychologist Kurt Koffka gave a fine example of the value of resistance (Miller, 2003). He told the story of an outstanding German weightlifting team who were far superior to any other team at the time and were fully expected to make a clean sweep of the medals at the world championships. Leading up to these championships they were lifting far more than any of their rivals. The championships were held in a new sports centre in Switzerland and the team failed miserably. When a gestalt psychologist explored the situation it transpired that prior to the championships the weightlifting team had always been able to focus on an opposing wall and power against this ‘fix’. In the new arena the light was such that a glare made the opposing wall appear to disappear. They had nothing to lift against, nothing to use as a resistance. This is also an example of how the field we are standing in profoundly affects the individual.
Resistance is a manifestation of energy and can be passive or active. It is often a way of protecting oneself from an actual or perceived threat or lack of support and as such needs to be respected by the therapist. There is always a story behind every resistance. Part of the process of heightening awareness is the telling and understanding of the client’s story. In my experience accepting the client’s resistance often has the effect of dissolving it. Some clients need to recycle the same resistance to contact whilst the therapist simply meets them with consistency. Others need to build resistance, an example being people who are too readily open in an environment where a degree of caution maybe indicated. Work with the contact–resistance continuum often involves many small steps.

One cannot destroy resistances; and in any case they are not evil, but are valuable energies of our personality harmful only when wrongly applied.

(Perls, 1947: 153)

By ‘wrongly applied’ Perls was referring to when a creative adjustment that was useful in the past becomes outdated in relation to the client’s current situation. It is the actual current situation that determines whether a resistance is healthy or unhealthy rather than the style of resistance viewed in isolation. Forever the poet seeking the snappy catchphrase, Perls described our ‘resistances as assistances’ (ibid: 155).

Our resistances are created in relationship and can only be revised in relationship. We each shape one another’s levels of contact and resistance. ‘The reaches and limitations of our experiential worlds are continually being shaped in interaction with the experiential worlds of others’ (Jacobs, 2007: 15). In this process of co-creation we literally create each other’s worlds. In gestalt therapy we affirm and work with the contact–resistance continuum with the hypothesis that it is the resistance that holds the key to the future. If external support is not available from the environment and the individual believes he does not have sufficient self support then impasse results. This is when the person divides their energy between impulse and resistance.