

FOUR LECTURES *

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I

In my lectures in Gestalt therapy, I have one aim only: to impart a fraction of the meaning of the word *now*. To me, nothing exists except the now. Now = experience = awareness = reality. The past is no more and the future not yet. Only the *now* exists.

The plight of the psychology of our time is that we are basically divided into two classes: the one interested in behavior and the other interested in awareness, or lack of awareness—be it called consciousness, experience, or whatever. This is the phenomenological approach which emphasizes the messages that are self-evident—existential in the pure sense—that we receive through the organs of our senses. We know through seeing, hearing, feeling; from these come the primary information we get about ourselves and our relation to life. The behaviorist, on the other hand, is not interested in the phenomenon of awareness and the subjective approach. He does, however, have the great advantage over most other methods in that he works in the here and now. He sees *this* animal, looks at *this* person, and investigates how *this* person is behaving. If you put these two together—the phenomenological approach, the awareness of what is, and the behavioral approach with its emphasis on behavior in the now—then you have in a nutshell what we are trying to do in Gestalt therapy.

When we look at behavior, we see essentially two kinds: public behavior and private behavior. Public behavior is overt observable behavior of which observers and we ourselves may be aware, and private behavior includes those things of which we may be aware, but an observer is not. This private behavior is usually called thinking, or speculating, or rehearsing, or computing.

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Before I go any further, I would like to discuss briefly four basic philosophical approaches, as I see them. The first approach is *science*, or as I call it, “aboutism,” which lets us talk *about* things, gossip *about* ourselves or others, broadcast *about* what’s going on in ourselves, talk *about* our cases. Talking about things, or ourselves and others as though we were things, keeps out any emotional responses or other genuine involvement. In therapy, aboutism is found in rationalization and intellectualization, and in the “interpretation game” where the therapist says, “This is what your difficulties are *about*.” This approach is based on noninvolvement.

The second philosophy I call “shouldism.” The “should” mentality is found overtly or covertly in every philosophy and definitely in every religion. Even in Buddhism there is an implied shouldism, in that you *should* experience Nirvana, you *should* achieve the state of freedom from suffering; at least it is praised as something worth achieving. Religions are full of taboos, of *shoulds* and *should not*s. I’m sure you all realize that you grow up completely surrounded by what you should and should not do, and that you spend much of your time playing this game within yourself—the game I call the “top-dog/under-dog game,” or the self-improvement game,” or the “self-torture game.” I’m certain that you are very familiar with this game. One part of you talks to the other part and says, “You should be better, you should not be this way, you should not do that, you shouldn’t be what you are, you should be what you are not.” Shouldism is based on the phenomenon of dissatisfaction.

Lately a third kind of thinking has come about: ontological thinking, or the existential approach, or “is-ism.” This looks at and perceives the world as it *is*, as we *are*, making irrelevant and bracketing off what we *should* be. You might call this the eternal attempt to achieve truth. But what is truth? Truth is one of what I call the “fitting games.”

Here I will wander off a minute and talk about some of the important games. One of the main games we play is the “one-upmanship game”: “I’m better than you are,” “I can trump you,” “I can depress you.” A second main game is the “fitting game”: “Does this concept *fit* reality?” “Is this correct?” “If I see this and this, can I fit them together so that I can see a comprehensive picture?” “Does the behavior of this person fit into my concept of how a person should behave?” These are some of the fitting games. Now in existentialism the fitting game is truth. By “truth” I mean nothing but the assertion that a statement we make fits the observable reality. If a person says, “I’m angry with you,” in a soft, polite tone of voice, it doesn’t fit. His tone of voice is inconsistent with the anger he claims to feel. If he says, “Damn you! I’m angry with you!” then his anger and voice fit.

But none of the existentialists, with the possible exception of Heidegger, can really carry through their existential idea to ontological behavior—that a thing is explained through its very existence. They keep asking “Why?” and so have to keep going back and getting support: Sartre from Communism, Buber from Judaism, Tillich from Protestantism; Heidegger to a small extent from Nazism, Binswanger from psychoanalysis. Binswanger in particular is always trying to go back to the causal—to that semantic mistake—trying to explain the event by its precedent, by its history, and therefore making the usual mistake of mixing up memories and history.

Finally, there is the Gestalt approach, which attempts to understand the existence of any event through the way it comes about, which tries to understand becoming by the *how*, not the *why*; through the all pervasive gestalt formation; through the tension of the unfinished situation, which is the biological factor. In other words, in Gestalt therapy we try to be consistent with every other event, especially with nature because we are a part of nature. That our life is not consistent with the demands of society is not because nature is at fault or we are at fault, but because society has undergone a process that has moved it so far from healthy functioning, natural functioning, that our needs and the needs of society and the needs of nature do not fit together any more. Again and again we come into such conflict until it becomes doubtful whether a healthy and fully sane and honest person can exist in our insane society.

Now, I would like to discuss what I think are the two most important discoveries of Freud. Freud said (this is not his formulation, but my understanding of what he meant) that in a neurosis a part of our personality or of our potential is not available. But he said this in an odd way; he said, “it is *in* the unconscious,” as if there were such a thing as the unconscious rather than simply behavior or emotions that are unknown or not available. Freud also saw the basis of the gestalt formation in what he called the “preconscious.” We call it the “background” out of which the figure emerges. We can go further and point up the fact that only a small portion of our potential—of what we could be—is available.

The other important discovery of Freud, which he never followed up and which seems to have gotten lost, is his remark, “*Denken ist Probearbeit*” (“Thinking is trial work”). I have reformulated it this way, “Thinking is rehearsing.” Thinking is rehearsing in fantasy for the role you have to play in society. And when it comes to the moment of performance, and you’re not sure whether your performance will be well received, then you get stage fright. This stage fright has been given by psychiatry the name “*anxiety*.” “What will I have to say on the examination?” “What will I say in my lecture?” You meet a girl and think “What will I have to wear to impress her?” and so on. All of this is rehearsing for

the role you play. I think Freud’s sentence “*Denken ist Probearbeit*” is one of his great ideas.

Part of the reason why Freud could not follow up this idea was because rehearsing is relating to the future, and Freud was concerned only with the past. So this concept did not fit into his general theory and he had to drop it. But I would like you to consider for a moment how much time and how much of your potential you invest in thinking or rehearsing for the future in comparison with how much time you invest in thinking about the past.

Now, I can again talk about the *now*.

I maintain that all therapy that has to be done can only be done in the now. Anything else is interfering. And the technique that lets us understand and stay with the now is the “awareness continuum,” discovering and becoming fully aware of each actual experience. If you can stay with this, you will soon come across some experience which is unpleasant. For instance, you get bored, or feel uncomfortable, or feel like crying. At that moment, something happens which Freud did not see clearly enough; at that point we become phobic. Freud saw the active blocking out of experience and called it “repression.” He also saw the alienation of our experience and called it “projection.” What I want to point out is that the critical moment is the frequent interruption of whatever we experience in the now. We interrupt by various means: we start to explain, we suddenly discover that we have taken up too much of the group’s time, we remember that we have something important to do, or we get into the schizophrenic flight of ideas which is called by psychoanalysis “free association” (even though it is compulsive dis-association). This interruption of the awareness continuum prevents maturation, prevents therapy from becoming successful, prevents marriage from becoming richer and deeper, prevents inner conflicts from being solved. The whole purpose of this avoidance tendency is to maintain the status quo.

And what is the status quo? The status quo is *holding onto the concept that we are children*. This is opposite to the psychoanalytic viewpoint. Freud thought we are infantile because of prior trauma, but this is backward rationalization. We are infantile because we are afraid to take responsibility in the now. To take our place in history, to be mature, means giving up the concept that we have parents, that we have to be submissive or defiant, or the other variations on the child’s role that we play.

In order to extend this, I need to talk about maturing. Maturation is the development from environmental support to self-support. The baby is entirely dependent on environmental support. As the child grows up, it learns more and more to stand on its own feet, create its own world, earn its own money, become emotionally independent. But in the neurotic this process does not adequately take place. The child—or the childish

neurotic—will use his potential not for self-support but to act out phony roles. These phony roles are meant to mobilize the environment for support instead of mobilizing one's own potential. We manipulate the environment by being helpless, by playing stupid, asking questions, wheedling, flattering.

The result is that in life, and especially in therapy, we come to the "sick point" (as Russian psychiatry calls it), to the point where we are stuck, to the impasse. The impasse occurs where we cannot produce our own support and where environmental support is not forthcoming. In Gestalt therapy we see this happening again and again and again. Psychoanalysis unfortunately tends to foster childishness and dependency, first by its fantasies that the patient is a child and that everything should be related to a "father image" or "childhood trauma" or "transference"; and then by giving environmental support again and again in the form of intellectual interpretation which says, "I know you are stupid and immature. I know what you are doing. I know more than you. I will explain everything." But this prevents the person from truly understanding himself.

This is why I am absolutely dogmatic in regard to the fact that nothing exists except in the now, and that in the now you are behaving in a certain way that will or will not facilitate your development, your acquisition of a better ability to cope with life, to make available what was unavailable before, to begin to fill in the voids in your existence. Everyone has to some extent the kind of voids that are so apparent in the neurotic and schizophrenic. One person has no eyes, another no ears, another no legs to stand on, another no perspective, another no emotion. In order to fill these voids, which are usually experienced as boredom with life, emptiness, loneliness, we have to get through the impasse and through the frustrations of the impasse, which usually lead us to shortcut the frustrations and with them the whole learning process.

Now there are two ways of learning. In the first, you get information; you get someone to tell you what your dreams mean, what concepts will be useful, what the world is like. Then you feed this into your computer and you play the fitting game. Does this concept fit in with these other concepts? However, the best way of learning is not the computation of information. Learning is discovering, uncovering what is there. When we discover, we are uncovering our own ability, our own eyes, in order to find our potential, to see what is going on, to discover how we can enlarge our lives, to find means at our disposal that will let us cope with a difficult situation. And all this, I maintain, is taking place in the here and now. Any speculation about things, any attempt at getting information and assistance from outside help will not produce maturation. So anyone who works with me has to do it with a continuous account of the now. "I am

experiencing this; now I feel this; now I don't want to work anymore; now I am bored." From here we can go on to differentiate what of the now experience is acceptable to you, when you want to run away, when you are willing to suffer yourself, when you feel yourself being suffered, and so on. All of this is explored in reality, in our encounter here with each other.

Said in another way, most psychotherapies are trying to get to the deepest depth. We are trying to get to the outermost surface. As every need, every unfinished situation emerges, we are being controlled by this emergent need and have to get in touch with the world to satisfy this need. We use our senses to observe, to see what is going on. The world is opening up. This ability to see is health. Conversely, the neurotic can be defined as a person who can't see the obvious, as in Anderson's fairy tale where only the child points to the obvious—that the king is naked. This is why, when I start working with a group, I often play schoolteacher and ask them to discover and verbalize the obvious.

II

In addition to the now, I also emphasize the process of *centering*, the reconciliation of opposites so that they no longer waste energy in useless struggle with each other, but can join in productive combination and interplay. For example, let us look at one of the main problems that people think they have—the problem of their own existence.

What is the opposite of existence? The immediate answer would be nonexistence, but this is incorrect. The opposite would be antiexistence, just as the opposite of matter is antimatter. As you know, scientists have managed to create matter out of energy. What has this to do with us in psychology? Mainly that in science we have finally come back to the pre-Socratic philosopher, Heraclitus, who said that everything is flow, flux, process. There are no "things." *Nothingness* in the Eastern languages is *no-thingness*. We in the West think of nothingness as a void, an emptiness, a nonexistence. In Eastern philosophy and modern physical science, nothingness—no-thingness—is a form of process, ever moving.

In science we try to find ultimate matter, but the more we split up matter, the more we find other matter. We find movement, and movement equals energy: movement, impact, energy, but no things. Things came about, more or less, by man's need for security. You can manipulate a thing, you can play fitting games with it. These concepts, these somethings can be put together into something else. "Something" is a thing, so even an abstract noun becomes a thing.

When we work in therapy, we always come across the nothingness, and we see that this no-thingness is some very alive process. I hope

you understand the meaning of dealing with things—that in order to bring things back to life, we have to change them into process again. Reification, the making a thing out of a process, is the functioning of what I call the implosive or catatonic or death layer. If you *have* a body, if you *have* a mind, these *things* are apparently objects that belong to some instance called “I.” “I” am the proud possessor—or the despising possessor—of a mind, of a body, of a world. So in effect I say, “I *have* some body” (*some* body) rather than realize that I *am* somebody.

In Gestalt therapy we look at the way a person manipulates his language, and we see that the more alienated he is from himself, the more he will use nouns instead of verbs, and most especially, the word *it*. It is a “thing” that is convenient to use to avoid being alive. When I’m alive, I talk, I am “voicing.” When I’m dead, I “have” a *voice* with *words*; this *language* will have an *expression*; etc. You notice that this description is mostly a string of nouns, and that all that remains of life is to put them together.

To help you understand the importance of the implosive layer and its role in neuroses, I will describe more completely what I consider the five layers of neurosis. The first layer we encounter is what I call the Eric Berne layer, or the Sigmund Freud layer, or the phony layer, where we play games, play roles. It is identical with Helene Deutsch’s description of the “as if” person. We behave *as if* we are big shots, *as if* we are nincompoops, *as if* we are pupils, *as if* we are ladies, *as if* we are bitches, etc. It is always the “as if” attitudes that require that we live up to a concept, live up to a fantasy that we or others have created whether it comes out as a curse or as an ideal. What you call an ideal, I call a curse. It’s an attempt to get away from oneself. The result is that the neurotic person has given up living for his self in a way that would actualize himself. He wants to live instead for a concept, for the actualization of this concept—like an elephant who had rather be a rose bush, and a rose bush that tries to be a kangaroo. We don’t want to be ourselves; we don’t want to be what we are. We want to be something else, and the existential basis of this being something else is the experience of dissatisfaction. We are dissatisfied with what we do, or parents are dissatisfied with what their child is doing. He should be different, he shouldn’t be what he is; he should be something else.

Then comes religion, philosophy, the violin and strings—we should be wonderful and beautiful, and if you are a Christian, you should be unsubstantial. In the New Testament nature doesn’t count: only the supernatural, miraculous counts. So there should be no substance. And if you are dead, you should not be dead. Everything is regarded as if it should not exist as it is. In other words, the constitution with which we

are born—our inheritance—is despised. We are not allowed to be at home in ourselves, so we alienate those frowned-upon properties and create the holes I spoke of in my first talk, the voids, the nothingness where something should exist. And where there is something missing, we build up a phony artifact. We behave as if we actually have this property that is demanded by society and which finally comes to be demanded by what Freud called the superego, the conscience. This we encounter as the top-dog in those games that torture the under-dog, the other part of the self, by demanding the impossible—“Come on now, live up to that ideal!”

It would be nice if we could be such wonderful people, but Freud neglected an important element which we have to add. The superego is not opposed, as Freud-thought, to an ego or to an id, or to a cluster of our impulses and memories and energies. The top-dog is opposed to another personality, which I call the under-dog. Both have their characteristics and both fight for control. The top-dog is characterized mainly by righteousness. Whether he is right or wrong, he always knows what the under-dog should do. But the top-dog has very few means by which to reinforce his demands. He is really just a bully and tries to get his way by making threats. If you don’t do as he says, then you will be punished, or something terrible will happen. The under-dog who receives these orders is not righteous; on the contrary, he is very unsure of himself. He does not fight back or try to control by being a bully or by being aggressive. He fights back with other means. “Tomorrow.” “I promise.” “Yes, but . . .” “I do my best.” So these two, the top-dog and the under-dog, live a life of mutual frustration and continued attempts to control each other.

This, then, is what I call the first, or phony, layer, which includes these roles, the top-dog/under-dog games, the controlling games. If we once become aware of the phoniness of game-playing and try to become more honest or genuine, then we encounter pain, unpleasantness, despair, etc. We especially don’t like experiencing cruelty. “We shouldn’t hurt our neighbors or anyone else.” We completely forget that a basic law of nature is to kill in order to live. There is no creature, no organic substance that can sustain its life without killing other animals or plants. Of all the species, only the human being refuses to accept the need for killing and turns killing against himself: only the human being kills not for necessity but for greed and power. Especially now, as the individual is superseded by the superorganisms called states or nations, he is deprived of his need to kill and has surrendered his needs to kill to the state.

Killing and destroying get all mixed up. Actually, we can’t even eat an apple without destroying the substance of the apple. We destructure the apple as a single unit, cutting it to pieces with our front

teeth, grinding it down with our back teeth, dissolving it chemically until nothing of the apple is left except substances we can't assimilate, and so eliminate.

Once we are capable of understanding our reluctance to accept unpleasant experiences, we can get to the next layer, the phobic layer, the resistance, the objection to being what we are. This is where all the *should not*s that I have already discussed occur.

If we get behind the phobic layer, the objections, we find at that moment the impasse occurs. And within the impasse there is the feeling of being not alive, of deadness. We feel that we are nothing, we are things. In every bit of therapy we have to go through this implosive layer in order to get to the authentic self. This is where most schools of therapy and therapists shrink away, because they also fear deadness. Of course, it is not being dead, but the fear and feeling of being dead, of disappearing. The fantasy is taken for reality. Once we get through the implosive layer, we see something very peculiar happening. This can be seen most dramatically in the catatonic state, when the patient who has appeared as a corpse explodes to life. And this is what happens when the implosive state is dissolved—explosions happen.

The explosion is the final neurotic layer that occurs when we get through the implosive state. As I see it, this progression is necessary to become authentic. There are essentially four types of explosion: explosion into joy, into grief, into orgasm, into anger. Sometimes the explosions are very mild—it depends on the amount of energy that has been invested in the implosive layer.

Perhaps I can make clearer where the catatonic state, the implosive state, comes about by talking about physiology. You know that in order to move a muscle, you send an electric shock into the muscle, and the muscle jerks. If you interrupt the shock, again the muscle jerks. In order to keep the muscle contracted you must constantly repeat the electric shocks. So you can imagine in a catatonic state, or anytime you get tense, how much energy is invested in keeping tense, keeping rigid. And if this energy is not invested in keeping yourself rigid, the energy is freed for all kinds of activities—thinking, moving about, being alive. If suddenly freed, the pent-up energy will explode. Implosion becomes explosion, compression becomes expression.

I think I will give the group now a few minutes for questions and remarks about this lecture.

Question: You mentioned that getting through the implosive layer to the explosion may be perceived by both the patient and therapist as dangerous, and probably that's the reason for the implosive layer. How do the therapist and the

patient get beyond this? I have a patient that has exploded from a catatonic state into orgasm, and it looks like he may go back to the implosive layer or to catatonia because he can't adjust either way.

Perls: One thing you have to remember is that a person, in order to function well, has to have all four abilities for explosion available. The person who can explode into orgasm, but not anger or grief or joy is incomplete. What you're talking about is what I mentioned as the phobic layer avoiding the experience of the tension because of catastrophic fantasies, the fear of the risk. When so much energy is held back, so much life energy or *elan vital* is accumulated that the person can't hold it back any longer and the explosion may occur in a very violent way.

Comment: It reminds me of the explosion when atoms are separated—fission.

Perls: Fusion or fission. There is one way where the explosion and the danger of explosion is often diminished. This is the process of melting. Often you will find that at a certain point you are moved, you are involved, and you begin to melt, you feel soft, or you begin to cry. This is one of the buffers against a dangerous explosion. But basically one has to be willing to take risks.

Question: Is melting tenderness?

Perls: Tenderness is a form of melting. You will find that after a good explosion you will feel tender in the meaning of being subtle. But when you talk about tenderness, I am suspicious. It sounds like the undercore of toughness, and playing the toughy is a very important part of role-playing for the American youth.

Question: Would you say a bit about that—about youth playing the role of toughness?

Perls: Where does the American child get a great part of his information? From the comic strips. And what do the comic strips say? Do they talk about a man and a woman? No. They deal with the he-man and the glamour girl. This concept of a man is more like a cave man than a genuine man—and this is difficult to define—a man in the sense of living for his convictions. But the comic-strip

message is that a man has to be a toughy because otherwise he's a sissy. He has no other choice except to become a baseball hero or a homosexual. Only as a homosexual is he allowed to be tender, to be soft. The same is true for the female. A rough estimate is that the American female is divided into 90 percent bitches and 10 percent women. Women have to become bitches because they have to become glamour girls. As glamour girls they have to spend most of their time being photogenic and being looked at instead of having eyes, having genitals, having relationships. This results in a permanent kind of irritation, a permanent hostility. The man is seen as the enemy, and the only way to keep the enemy under control is to become a bitch. So the he-man and the bitch fit together as the main characters on the American stage.

Question: I only heard you mention four of the layers of neurosis.

Perls: The phony layer, the phobic, the impasse, the implosive, the explosive. If I categorize in this way and make a thing out of a process, please be tolerant and see that this is just an approximation of what the process is like.

Question: The phony level is where the games go on?

Perls: Yes.

Question: And the implosive layer is where the reasons for the games are. Is this right?

Perls: No. There are no reasons for the games.

Comment: Then I don't understand the implosive layer.

Perls: The implosive level is where the energies that are needed for living are frozen and invested unused. In order to free them for living we have to go through the process of exploding. If I'm thirsty, I do not have to go into the woods and find a spring with water. This would be the biological, primitive way. In our culture, I have to use a number of manipulations. For example, at this conference I ring a bell, and give the waiter orders, and go through all kinds of processes so that I can get water to balance out the minus in my organism. In the culture in which we live, we have to play roles in order to satisfy our needs. Now I could conceivably go into the corridor and explode. "Hello, hello! I want something to drink!" But I don't

do this. I play the prescribed roles. I'm polite and considerate.

Question: Will you say some more about the phobic layer?

Perls: The main phobic attitude I can think of is being phobic about discovering life. In order to avoid living a life of discovering the world and ourselves, we often take the short-cut of getting information. This is what you did right now—you asked me for information. But you could have set out and discovered what you are phobic about or what somebody else is phobic about—what you or they avoid. But instead you ask me to feed your computer, your thinking system. The basic phobic attitude is to be afraid to be what you are. And you will find relief immediately if you dare to investigate what you are like. You'll find that immediately you run into catastrophic fantasies. "If I am as I am, what will happen to me? Society will ostracize me. If I tell my boss to go to hell, I'll lose my job. If I tell my wife she's a bitch, she won't sleep with me." And so on and so on. So you become phobic, you start to manipulate, to play roles. Instead of saying, "You're a bitch," you compress your lips and don't talk to her. But you contract yourself and signal indirectly that you don't like what she's doing or the way she is. You implode yourself, because you are afraid to explode.

Question: When one is at the impasse level, is one afraid to see the world for what it is?

Perls: No, there is more to it. The impasse occurs every time you are not ready or willing to use your own resources (including your eyes) and when environmental support is not forthcoming. The extreme example of the impasse is the blue baby. The blue baby cannot provide its own oxygen, and the mother doesn't provide oxygen any more. The blue baby is at an impasse of breathing, and he has to find a way to breathe or die. Another good example of impasse is the average marriage, where the two partners are not in love with each other but with a concept of what the other should be. Each has almost no idea of what the other is like, and as soon as the behavior of one doesn't fit with what the partner expects, he becomes dissatisfied and starts playing the blaming game. He blames her: she should change; he blames himself: he should change—

all this rather than realize that they are in an impasse because they are in love with an image, a fantasy. They are stuck. But they don't know *how* they are stuck, and that's the impasse. The result of the impasse is to keep the status quo. They may want to change, but they don't: they keep the status quo because they are too frightened of going through the impasse.

Question: What breaks the impasse?

Perls: The impasse cannot be broken.

Question: It has to be accepted?

Perls: You might say that. The incredible thing which is so difficult to understand is that experience, awareness of the now, is sufficient to solve all difficulties of this nature, that is, neurotic difficulties. If you are fully aware of the impasse, the impasse will collapse, and you will find yourself suddenly through it. I know this sounds rather mystical, so I will give you an example. There are two items on the menu and you cannot decide which to order. But nature does not work by decisions but by preferences. If you prefer one food more than the other, you are through the impasse.

III

There are three themes I would like to touch on now. The first is the matter of answering patients' questions. You may have wondered about the fact that I almost never answer questions during therapy. Instead I usually ask the patient to change the question into a statement. The question mark has a hook the patient may use for many purposes, such as to embarrass the other person or, more often, to prevent himself from discovering what is really going on. This asking for environmental support keeps one in the infantile state. You will find that nothing develops your intelligence better than to take any question and turn it into a genuine statement. Suddenly the background will start to open up, and the ground from which the question grows will become visible.

A second theme concerns guilt feelings. According to psychoanalytic theory, the patient is cured if he is free from anxiety and guilt. Anxiety we have already dealt with as stage fright. The problem of guilt is even simpler: *guilt is projected resentment*. Any time you feel guilty, you will find a nucleus of resentment. But resentment in itself is still an incomplete emotion. Resentment is an effort at maintaining the status quo, a hanging-on; in resentment you can neither let go and be done by giving up, nor can

you be aggressive and angry and clear up the situation. Resentment is the bite that hangs on.

Possibly the most difficult mental feat for any patient is to forgive his parents. Parents are never right. They are either too stern or too soft, too strong or too weak. There is always something wrong with parents. And the balance between guilt feelings (that he owes them something) and resentment (that they owe him something) is achieved by a very peculiar phenomenon—gratefulness. Gratefulness leads to closure. Neither party owes the other anything.

My third theme is the importance of dreams. The dream is an existential message. It is more than an unfinished situation; it is more than an unfulfilled wish; it is more than a prophecy. It is a message of yourself to yourself, to whatever part of you is listening. The dream is possibly the most spontaneous expression of the human being, a piece of art that we chisel out of our lives. And every part, every situation in the dream is a creation of the dreamer himself. Of course, some of the pieces come from memory or reality, but the important question is what makes the dreamer pick out this specific piece? No choice in the dream is coincidental. As in paranoia, the person who is projecting looks for a peg on which to hang his hat. Every aspect of it is a part of the dreamer, but a part that to some extent is disowned and projected onto other objects. What does projection mean? That we have disowned, alienated, certain parts of ourselves and put them out into the world rather than having them available as our own potential. We have emptied a part of ourselves into the world; therefore we must be left with holes, with emptiness. If we want to own these parts of ourselves again we have to use special techniques by which we can reassimilate those experiences.

In working with a dream, I avoid any interpretation. I leave this to the patient since I believe he knows more about himself than I can possibly know. I used to go through the whole dream and work through every part; but many patients have difficulty in reidentification, and the difficulty is absolutely identical with the amount of self-alienation. Lately I take more of a short cut. I look mainly for the holes, the emptiness, the avoidances.

The first problem, then, is to find out what the dream is avoiding. Often we are immediately able to find what the patient is avoiding by finding out at what moment he interrupts the dream and wakes up rather than continue it. Very often the dreamer is avoiding death, being killed, or sex. Actually, I find that the whole question of survival, of killing and destroying, is at least as important as the sexual question.

Question: You say when the dream is interrupted by waking, we are avoiding something, but what if it is not interrupted by waking?

Perls: Then it is not always as easy to find out what is being avoided. Usually when you allow yourself to go on dreaming, you are not trying to avoid some terrible shock, as in a dream of falling in which you have to wake before you are smashed. Evasion is the usual base of neurosis, based on a misunderstanding of fantasy and reality. I can fall a thousand times in fantasy. I can kill a hundred people in my dreams—it is only fantasy and they are still alive. It is tragic that we are so unwilling even to imagine certain situations, so this fear of imagination, this mixing up of reality and fantasy persists. We stop ourselves from doing many things because we imagine the bad things that will happen, or we feel disappointed because all the rosy things we expect and wish just do not happen. All those wonderful things—we go to Las Vegas with five dollars and come back with a hundred thousand; or we dream of being a wonderful, perfect human being. This doesn't happen, so we are disappointed. We prevent ourselves from using what we have or from reassimilating what we have disowned.

Let me give you an example. A woman dreamed that she had three orphans and each of the orphans had an artificial hand or arm, all very beautifully carved, and she was looking for the best surgeon to make the best possible prosthesis substitute for the hands. Where is the avoidance, the emptiness here? Well, it is obvious. So, I became very cruel and brutal, and took the prostheses away from the children. The children were left without hands. Where were the hands? Obviously in the person who made the prostheses. I learned that this woman was very artistically inclined and had sculpted for many years, but had lost the ability. So the carvings, the artistic abilities came out as a projection. The minus, the avoidance of existence in this case is the lack of organic hands. By working through this dream, I could give her back the use and appreciation of her hands.

Let me warn you to be very careful about dreams and dreamers who have no living beings in their dreams. Where there is only death or desert or buildings, you are most likely to have a severe psychotic case on your hands.

It is also important to let patients play at being the objects in the dream as well as the persons. Two of my favorite examples of this are from the same man. In one dream, he leaves my office, crosses the street into Central Park, and walks over the bridle path. I ask him to play the bridle path, and he answers, "What! And let everybody tramp and shit on me?" In another dream, he left his attache case on the stairs. I asked

him to be the attache case. He said, "Well, I've got a thick hide, in a thick skin. I've got secrets and nobody is supposed to get to my secrets. I keep them absolutely safe." See how much he tells us about himself by playing, identifying with the objects in his dreams? Also, you will learn a lot by paying attention to the locale, where the dream is staged. If a person dreams that he is in court, you know he is concerned with guilt, being accused, etc. If the dream takes place in a motel, you can guess what his existence is like.

The more you refrain from interfering and telling the patient what he is like or what he feels like, the more chance you give him to discover himself and not to be misled by your concepts and projections. And believe me, it is never easy to be able to differentiate between what we project and what we see and hear. Probably the most dangerous thing for a therapist to do is to play the computer game. You find patients whose life exists of sentences and computing, and if you feed information into their computers, and they compute back to you, nothing will ever happen. The computer game can go on for years and years.

To recapitulate: The two main words I want to impress on you are *now* and *how*. The difficulties lie in getting again and again pulled away from the now and into all kinds of rationalizations and making cases as to who is right and who is wrong. "I have a better interpretation than you have." "I know all about you." There is also the great danger of the Freudian approach. "This happens *because* it has happened before." As if one railroad station could be explained because there was another one before it. And you must be very careful to teach your patients to differentiate between reality and their fantasies, especially the transference fantasy—where they see you as a father or someone who can give them the goodies. Make them look again and again to see the difference between this father and you until they wake up and come to their senses.

Even if you are compulsive about *now* and *how*, it can't do any harm, and the compulsion will dissolve into something alive and meaningful.

We don't know what the next step in history will be. We have come from the gods, to the causes of nature, to the process. Right now we live in the age of processes. I am sure that one day we will discover that awareness is a property of the universe—extension, duration, awareness. Right now the first experiments are being made. Flatworms have been cut up and fed to other worms, and experiments show that these know what the first generation had learned. Possibly this is the first step in demonstrating that awareness is a property of matter. But we cannot yet think in terms of billions and billions of parts of the quantum to measure awareness, and the idea that properties might exist that are not measurable is still beyond the concepts of today's psychologists.

Full identification with yourself can take place if you are willing to

take full responsibility—*response-ability*—for yourself, for your actions, feelings, thoughts; and if you stop mixing up responsibility with obligation. This is another semantic confusion in psychology. Most people believe that responsibility means, “I put myself under obligation.” But it does not. You are responsible only for yourself. I am responsible only for myself. This is what I tell a patient right away. If he wants to commit suicide, that’s his business. If he wants to go crazy, that’s his business. Jewish mothers have wonderful ways of manipulating people; they are experts on making one feel guilty, on pushing the buttons of conscience. But I am not in this world to live up to other people’s expectations, nor do I feel that the world must live up to mine.

Question: I’ve been putting together a number of things that you’ve said, and they’re making me uncomfortable. If a law of nature is to kill to maintain life, then how do we decide when transgression is harmful to ourselves, or dangerous to others, or unacceptable to them?

Perls: You want a prescription for behavior—for instance, how to make decisions. I cannot and will not provide you with that. Any decision has to be made by the situation in which an event occurs. Science has only recently proceeded from looking at pieces to recognizing the total approach, the Gestalt approach. Students have been taught that the organism consists of a number of reflex arcs, or that mind is over against matter, or that here is a person and there is the environment—not that here is a person who has accumulated some emotions that need to be relieved. I think that the Freudian “excremental” theory of emotions—that we have a certain quantum of aggression that should be discharged—is especially dangerous.

We are part of the universe, not separate. We and our environment are one. We cannot look without something to look at. We cannot breathe without air. We cannot live without being part of society. So we cannot possibly look on the organism as being able to function in isolation. So this organism here labeled “Fritz Perls” is a living sum of processes, of functions, and these functions are always related to something of the world he has, the world that we try to describe with the word *now*. The *now* is the world in which we live. And this organism is distinguished from this thing called “chair” by having an energy in itself which operates itself. Unlike a motor car, which has to take in gas and air to make the energy that explodes in the engine, we have to secure our own energy from the food and air we take in. We have no name for the energy we create. Bergson called it *elan vital*; Freud called it *libido* or *death instinct* (he

had two energies); and Reich called it *orgone*. I call it *excitement*, because the word *excitement* coincides with the physiological aspect, *excitation*.

Excitement is often experienced as rhythm, vibration, trembling, warmth. Again this excitement is not created for its own sake but in relation to the world. We take somebody’s hand and we feel the hand is warm. This person is glowing toward the world. Here is another person’s hand—he is cold. The frigid person always has cold hands. Of course, this person is impulsive; the other explosive, outgoing. So some excitement is always being generated. Excitement = life = being. Now, excitement as such is not enough, because excitement has to energize the organism. Much of it will energize the motor system; some will mobilize the senses. These are the two systems with which we relate to the world: the motoric system of manipulation, acting, handling; and the sensory system, or system of orientation, how we see and feel.

Nature is not wasteful; nature does not just create emotions to be discharged as the excremental theory wants to have it. Nature creates emotions as a means of relating, for we were made to cope with the world in different intensities. We relate differently when we are angry than when we are loving. I believe that there is some intelligence or wisdom of the organism that differentiates these basic energies into the different tasks and functions. At present I call it the *hormonal differentiation*. Apparently excitement becomes tinged with some other substance—adrenalin for anger, or sexual hormones for libidinous emotions. Thus excitement varies according to the situation. When we are asleep, we need less excitement, and our metabolism goes down. In emergency situations, we can produce peaks of excitement. You know how much energy, how much violence a person can produce under a state of attack. We speak about the superhuman strength a person can have *if* he is involved, *if* he is investing his whole personality in his experience. Excitement, then, goes especially into the motoric outlet because the muscles link us with the environment. You find that in most emotional events, emotion is transformed into movement. We cannot have sex without sexual rhythm and movement; we can’t grieve without our diaphragm shaking and tears being produced; we can’t be joyous without dancing. So whatever excitement is necessary to create and to cope with the situation is forthcoming from the organism, and there is no unnecessary excitement. When you speak about actions that might not be acceptable by society, there is the impasse. What do you choose—to be hostile to that society or to be part of society, identified with it and willing to subdue yourself?

Comment: That’s my hang-up.

Perls: This is the existential problem for most of us. And the more insane the society, the more it is a problem. The

American society dehumanizes people, making them into zombies without emotions, and the person without emotions will become like the machine. We don't live for the human being. I'm sure that at least 70 percent of the American people are employed in the production and service of machines. So if you violate the law of the machines, the machines will hit back through those in the service of the machines. The impasse can only be solved by finding a way that is acceptable to you *and* society. For instance, I am doing something against the society I described. I toss a Trojan horse—the human soul—into that society, yet I'm being paid for it. I don't do it because I'm a reformer or a dogooder, but because I enjoy it; I'm alive doing it.

I hope you don't expect me to give you a prescription for living. All I can say is that the neurotic way of living is a very uneconomical way. It's such a waste of time, waste of energy, waste of your existence.

Comment: I can accept my actions and the consequences of them for me, but I don't live alone. My life is tied up with others, especially my family. I have no right to accept the consequences for them. Only they can do that.

Perls: I object to that phrase, "no right." This is not a legal issue. "No right" is the top-dog speaking. You see what I mean about the excitement. As such, the excitement involved with our way of living has nothing to do with society itself. It is how we regulate our lives. If you decide that you like the society and identify with it by being a well-adjusted citizen, that is your existential choice. On the other hand, if you choose to be outside society, you are not necessarily being destructive.

Comment: You're making my greed show, because I want it both ways.

Perls: So you want it both ways. And you reproach me as if you are a bad man because you want it both ways. This is how you are. Eat *and* have. Everybody plays the role he plays; everybody is what he is. Nobody can at any given moment be different from what he is *at that moment*. If somebody comes to me and complains that his role is being depressed and he doesn't like it, then I can show this person that he is playing the depression game. He has a choice: he can

play top-dog with another person and depress that person or depress himself. If this is the game he wishes to play, fine. If he wants to play this game the other way round by being nasty and depressing other people, fine. Or he may dislike certain people and go around depressing them, and so feel fine. In other words, all I can do is possibly to help people to reorganize themselves, to function better, to enjoy life more, to feel—and this is very important—to feel more real. What more do you want? Life is not violins and roses.

IV

I will conclude by discussing some ways you can continue your own growth, so you can help yourself to become aware. Now as long as we are aware, we are always aware *of something*. Sometimes the awareness is so dim that we are in a kind of trance, but basically we are always experiencing something. Even when the antiawareness forces are at work, as in sleep or fainting, very often some message is coming through, such as a dream. What we are aware of is always the message of the unfinished situation. Usually an unfinished situation is very pressing if you allow nature to take its course. If you have a letter to answer, then this letter is on your conscience not just on your desk. The situation demands to be finished.

We can use this demand for self-therapy in the form of meditation. There are many forms of meditation, and people do not understand how they differ. Many people think that meditation takes place in the realm of thoughts and ideas. When I talk of meditation, I do not mean this kind of game. To use the kind of meditation I mean is very difficult—it may take years to accomplish, especially if you are a talker. Usually people are either talkers or listeners; very few are both. People often say, "I told myself . . ." or "I said to myself . . ." but they seldom say, "I listened to myself." The kind of meditation I suggest is learning to listen to your thinking. You can hear yourself thinking, and listen until you can hear whether *you* are talking or *somebody else* is talking.

You will find it very difficult to get the basic energy into your ears instead of your fantasy throat. But when you can do this, you will realize a very peculiar phenomenon—that is, in spite of being alone, all this thinking is essentially a substitute for encounters. It is an inner world or stage that replaces the external world or stage. But if you do not listen, you will not realize that you are always talking to somebody, even if it is as vague as talking to the world. You may be telling people what they should do or defending yourself, or manipulating somebody or impressing someone.

This is nothing especially new, but it is in this process that we come across the unpleasant experience, the block, the status quo that prevents us from becoming truly substantial and growing up. And this is where we can accomplish a great deal deliberately. It's very peculiar that we can become spontaneous only by utmost discipline. It is an absolute paradox. And absolute discipline is required in getting the antidote for our phobic attitude. The antidote is to become interested in your negative emotions. If you develop a kind of scientific objectivity, or a willingness to suffer yourself and focus on whatever unpleasant situation that might come up, then you come across the blocks for further development. I would say that one of the most important kinds of unpleasantness is boredom, so much so that I think that one of the hell gates that leads to maturity, to *satori*—the great awakening—is the ability to stay with boredom, not to try to jump out of it, do something interesting, or use it for complaining.

But boredom is not the only unpleasantness we encounter. There is also the feeling of frustration. It is true that in a final sense, we cannot possibly be frustrated. Either our self-esteem or the organism will always find some way out. If a girl rejects us, we will try to get a substitute satisfaction by becoming vindictive or violent. Whatever frustration we encounter, there is always some alternate attempt to get satisfaction. The only trouble is that if the key doesn't fit the lock, the door doesn't open—the substitute does not lead to the completion of the situation. But staying with frustration, staying with boredom, will evoke organismic self-regulation. It is like a cut. *You* cannot do anything to heal the cut. The organism takes over. You might prevent further complications by sterilizing the cut, but if you leave it alone, nature will take care of it. If you want a better understanding of the simplicity of life and environment, I recommend a pocketbook entitled *The Top of the World*,* which says much about the beauty and the meaningfulness of life. At one point an Eskimo says, "The white people are peculiar people. They bring their laws along but leave their wives at home."

You see, we clog up our lives with so many thousands of unnecessary unfinished situations. If you want to play the role of a lady, you must have a beautiful costume for this role. So you go out and buy it, or cut up pieces of cloth, and sew them together just so, in a fashionable way. But then, this costume is not finished in time, so you get angry, and so on. And think of all the other props—all for what is an unnecessary role!

If you can stay with your feelings of unpleasantness, you will find that situations tend more and more, quicker and quicker, to be finished or discarded as events that merely clog up your life. Therapists quickly become aware of how people clog up their lives by dragging unpleasant parents

*Hans Ruesch, *Top of the world*. New York: Pocket Books, Inc., #50198.

around with them. Well of course we are not Eskimos; we do not just put parents on sleds and let them freeze to death. But we can say, "I'm a big boy now. I don't need you."

Begin meditation by closing your eyes and just listening to your own thinking, whatever you are saying to yourself. Then, when you learn to listen, the next step is to produce a therapist. If you like me, take me, and have encounters with Fritz; take whomever you choose, it does not matter. By choosing your therapist and having him respond to you in what you are saying, you will be amazed at how much you know, at how much you can actually help yourself, at how much self-support you will discover. You will also be amazed to realize how much you have played stupid and helpless and phony rather than finding your self-support. You see, the psychoanalytic idea of transference is this: transference is the historical repetition of what has been. I look upon it as resentment of what it has not been.

Usually, the patient expects the therapist to give him what he is missing, to fill his holes. By playing therapist to himself, he is capable of filling his own holes. I am sure you know only too well the projection mechanism, what patients imagine, and project onto you. If you make them play at giving what you are supposed to give them, then they can reown what they have disowned—for instance, the power they hand over to others.

You can save yourself much strain and stress while doing therapy by withdrawing as often as possible. Most therapists think that they have to stay in contact with the patient all the time. But the two extremes of contact and withdrawal are both pathological. If you always hang on and cannot let go, you are fixated. If you are completely withdrawn and out of touch, then you are isolated. I can give you a simple example: A clenched fist is not a hand. A flat palm with rigidly outstretched fingers is not a hand. *This* is a hand—moving, changing, doing many things, and varying its position and movement. Similarly the heart is not a heart in its extension or in its contraction, but rather in its rhythm of contraction and relaxation. So contact with the world is a rhythm. At times it is a confluence, a oneness; at other times, isolation. As an example, sometimes you want to say something but a word is missing. You withdraw to your fantasy dictionary, find the right word, then you come back. Or perhaps you see someone and don't know what to say, so you withdraw and rehearse, then come back into contact.

As for the fixation, the deliberate energy that is called attention is very short-lived. The organism has inexhaustible awareness but it does not produce much deliberate energy. For example, if you try to concentrate on a red object, you immediately start to produce antiawareness in the form of a neutralizing color. When you look away or close your eyes

you see green instead of red, indicating that you should have withdrawn from the red sooner and looked at something else. So, if you feel compelled to listen to all the garbage your patients say, especially if they are trying to bore you, hypnotize you, put you to sleep, you will be exhausted by the end of the session or of the day. But if you allow yourself to withdraw when there is no interest, you will find yourself immediately involved again when something of interest occurs. Again, if you trust the wisdom of the organism, you will be amazed at how much working capacity you have. Many times, when a group or an individual is bored or withdrawn, I will ask everyone to withdraw in fantasy.

Question: Is it possible to use some of the techniques you have talked about in a group situation?

Perls: Of course. In fact, I think that individual therapy is obsolete, that it should be the exception rather than the rule. There are certain situations when somebody in the group is not ready to be open with the group. In that case individual therapy is indicated. But workshops are, both financially and in regard to personal development, much more feasible. Consider how much you learn in a group from indirect participation.

Question: Do you have any suggestions that would help a group to function? Can a group function without a leader?

Perls: I think a group can function well without a leader if the group will agree to some basic rules and everyone watches to insure that the rules are being followed. Here are some of the basic rules: (1) Be alert when you leave the *now*, and always go back to the *now* in the sense of both the open now and the hidden now of fantasies. (2) Forbid the use of the word *it*. (3) Encourage everyone to change nouns into verbs. (4) Never gossip about any person who is not present. Bring the absent one into an encounter by having the speaker play both roles; (5) Never force a confession. Never force anyone to say something that he does not want to say, or intrude into him. Merely deal with objections and have them expressed. (6) Give support by helping the person find his own support—by asking, “How do you. . .?” rather than saying, “Do this.” These are some of the attitudes that will facilitate maturation.

Question: Will you say something about *why*?

Perls: The word *why* is the infantile approach of explanation. *Why* cannot lead to understanding. There may be one exception—when you use *why* to mean *for what purpose*. But when *why* is used for causality, it is covering up the issue with computing and rationalization. Explanation prevents understanding. The great danger you encounter as therapists is that you were trained to play the interpretation game, and the assumption of this game is that you know something about the other person and that it will help him if you tell him. Sometimes that is correct. Sometimes you do actually see what is going on. Then you might not do great harm, unless you are premature in telling him something that he is not ready for. But *anything* you can do to help the other person *discover himself* is always good. Only what we discover ourselves is truly learned.

Question: How can the therapist use himself in trying to help the patient come to terms with himself?

Perls: By being open and honest. Freud was not able to be open, and his problem got changed into a technique that took many years to correct. What happened was similar to a friend in South Africa who sent a very delicate cup to Japan to have a copy made, since the Japanese are very good at copying things. He ordered many dozens of these cups. When they arrived, all the cups arrived with handles—not attached. What had happened was that the handle of the original cup had broken off in the mail, and the Japanese copied the cup exactly as it was, in two pieces. This is similar to what happened in psychotherapy. Freud had a deep phobia. He was embarrassed to look into anybody's face or to be stared at, so he avoided the situation by putting the patient on a couch and sitting behind him. Soon this symptom became standard procedure, like the broken handle. Now we have to do the opposite. We have to make a big fuss and discover the obvious—a new type of therapy called “encounter therapy.” We have finally remembered that it seems only natural that we have eyes to see the other person, that we can talk directly to him, etc.

In an encounter we must be aware of the polarities because everything, every energy is differentiated into opposites. We have many opposites: right and left, top-dog

and under-dog, sadist and masochist. We try to integrate the opposed events and see how they fit until we find the center. We can be alert and have perspective only if we have a center. If we lose the center, we are out of balance.

Question: Will you talk about right and left as opposites?

Perls: The right hand is usually the motoric, male, aggressive side that wants to control, to determine what is, to decide what is "right." The left side is the female side; it is usually poorly coordinated. *Left* means *awkward* in many languages: *gauche* in French, *linkich* in German. When there is a conflict between emotional life and active life, there is neurosis. When the male and female side fight with each other, this uses up energy in inner conflict and frustration and games and so on. But when both power and sensitivity are working in coordination, there is genius. Every genius in literature has this female component integrated with the male, and every female genius has a strong male component. An important aspect of training in Zen is training for alertness, which involves really having a center so that one can always be alert to what is going on. Ultimate awareness can only take place if the computer is gone, if the intuition, the awareness is so bright that one really comes to his senses. The empty mind in Eastern philosophy is worthy of highest praise. So lose your mind and come to your senses.