Rita Resnick has been Faculty Chair of GATLA’s European Summer Residential Training Programme since 1991. In addition to her private practice, Rita is actively training psychotherapists in the United States, Australia and Europe, in both Gestalt and couples therapy. Her professional interests include the exploration of innovative and supportive approaches to supervision. She has published an article with Liv Estrup and has a devoted, passionate and self-serving interest in the area of women growing older – menopause and mid-life vitality. An interview on Contemporary Gestalt therapy with Rita and Robert Resnick has been published in the *Tidsskrift For Norsk Psykologforening*, the Norwegian Journal for Psychologists. An interview with the Resnicks on their approach to Couples Therapy can be found on the home page of the GATLA website: www.gatla.org

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What was your way into Gestalt therapy? Why Gestalt therapy? When did you choose psychotherapy as such?

I knew I wanted to be a therapist from about age ten. My mother had a good friend whose husband died quite young. She raised her two daughters alone and I adored her girls, two and four years older than me. The older girl was very strongly impacted by her father’s death and spent much time talking about her grief, loss and longing. The depth of her emotions and her willingness to talk about such personal anguish captured me. She wanted to be a psychologist and my interest was peaked. I began asking my mother about what a psychologist does and how to become one. The “want to be” psychologist died in her 20’s of cancer and I wanted to carry her torch. Fast forward to Berkeley where I was a psychology major and to a graduate school internship (USC) in which a Gestalt therapist, Eric Marcus, ran a group for staff and interns. I was totally amazed at Eric’s speed and adeptness at identifying the characterological process of a staff member whom I knew well. How did he do that? How did he gain this razor sharp eye? I joined the Los Angeles Gestalt therapy training programme and was exposed to trainers like Gary Yontef, Arnie Beisser, Jan Rainwater, Jan Ruckert and, of course, my future husband, Bob Resnick. I was also struggling personally with a first marriage and divorce during those two years and had difficulty getting full benefit from the training I was receiving.

Gestalt therapy, although very popular in the 1960s and 1970s, was very much identified with the encounter groups, the humanistic psychology movement and not with academic psychology. I wanted to know the roots of psychotherapy so I left Gestalt therapy to take a two-year full time postgraduate fellowship at a psychoanalytic clinic (Reiss Davis Child Study Center) where I learned psychoanalytic theory and therapy. After two years I went hurtling back to Gestalt therapy – this time to take full advantage of the training – both feet in. To see the differences so clearly between classic psychoanalysis and Gestalt therapy was eye opening. Psychoanalysts, at that time, put themselves in a very hierarchical and expert position knowing all that was unconscious and unavailable to the patient. Dialogue, phenomenology, taking context into account, was totally absent. When I came back into Gestalt training I began individual therapy with Gertrude Harrow, Ph.D. She was an inspiration for me. Gert was energetic with a zest for life, optimistic with a sharp mind and an extremely full personal and social calendar. Fleeing the Nazis in her teenage years, Gert landed in Ireland, attended Trinity College,
and moved to the US to do her Ph.D. at the University of Chicago. There she met Hedda Bolgar who became her mentor and friend. Gert moved to Los Angeles with Hedda and Alexander French, raised her children there and opened her therapy practice as a Gestalt therapist. What inspired me most was her honest, warm manner and her ability to be captured by the moments between us. Although Gert would never call herself a feminist, she exemplified a strong, self-supporting attitude with an emphasis on helping me develop an autonomous self. She was non-conventional – doing some therapy in the garden house in her backyard, wearing beautiful bohemian clothing, sharing herself personally with her clients – letting her true self be known. I did not find that interruptive, rather it encouraged me to be more open and available both for my own growth and with my clients. I attribute a lot of my style of Gestalt therapy to Gert – Thank you.

I met Bob Resnick again several years after my divorce from my first husband. I had known Bob a bit from a previous training group and had heard his lectures at the Sunday evening meetings held by the Gestalt Therapy Institute of Los Angeles. Our paths crossed again at a local Santa Monica deli, he with his co-therapist getting a bite after group, and me with a date after finishing a guitar class. Bob, in his inimitable way, yelled across the restaurant, “Don’t I know you from somewhere?” and me getting embarrassed and pissed that he didn’t know who I was, yelled back, “Not sure – perhaps from some Gestalt training function”. In my version of the continuation of that story, Bob leaves the deli and hides in the bushes and waits for me to say goodnight to my date approximately thirty minutes later and then casually approaches my car to have a chat. As you can imagine, his version is different. We’ve been together now for forty-two years and are frequently happily married. I have been most strongly influenced as a therapist by Bob. He is the clearest theoretician I have ever heard and his work as a Gestalt therapist is unsurpassed. This sounds like pure nepotism, however, it is completely true for me. What has influenced me the most is learning how to understand and articulate clearly the process I see and maintain a connection with the client while doing so, how to deal with difference both with couples and individuals and how to integrate theory with clinical practice and speak about both processes.

*How would you describe your style of Gestalt therapy and has it changed from the time of your training?*
I am focused mainly on my clients ongoing processes – the repetitive, characterological patterns that occur when one meets the world i.e. backing away from contact, expressing pessimism about outcomes, making jokes about important matters, etc. These are patterns that were developed in childhood in direct response to the environment in which one was raised. They were healthy and creative adaptations to life at the time. Alcoholic parents are often erratic in their responses to children. Walking into a room on one occasion, parents might greet their child with joy and appreciation and another time express anger and irritation and slap him for disturbing them. To adapt to these huge discrepancies, the child learns to enter a room cautiously, stop, scan and assess the level of danger before proceeding. This is a healthy response to an unpredictable situation. When I see this client and he is now forty years old living with his wife, holding an important job, and he enters my office with extreme caution and hesitancy, I begin to think about character. I begin to notice an anachronistic pattern or process that served him well in the past that now habitually continues acontextually.

If I have developed a contactful and meaningful relationship with this client, I am able to begin to point to his behavior and, with him, unpack the function, meaning and current usefulness of this behavior. I help him become aware of his patterns so that he can make a choice about how to continue. If he does not know what he is doing he has no possibility of choosing to do something different. Gestalt therapy deals elegantly with the idea that the relevant past emerges in the present. My client’s old patterns of entering a room are remnants of his past that show up here and now and are germane to his current functioning. There is no need to go on an archeological dig to try to uncover the relevant past. It is right here in the present where it is available for exploration and understanding.

I want to say a bit more about the importance of the relationship in Gestalt therapy. I believe that just about all therapy is about relationships – with spouses, partners, parents, children, friends, etc. If we did not talk about these relationships, what would therapy be about? About half of my practice is working with individuals and half with couples and both populations are looking to improve their relationships. Of particular importance are the therapeutic relationships wherein there is a real opportunity for I-Thou moments: moments where both my client and myself “show up” fully as we are and are focused on what is between us and what is alive rather than on an outcome. These moments are the most thrilling in therapy – really touching the
essence of another and the other touching me. Gestalt therapy gives not only permission to be oneself but encourages authenticity in the therapy room – an opportunity to bring my feelings, thoughts, musings to the meeting (with clinical judgment, of course) which serves as a model for my client while simultaneously giving me freedom to be me. As I said earlier, many years of my training were in classical Freudian Psychoanalysis in which the relationship with the patient was non-existent and unimportant. What a difference!

I think my style has evolved over the years. I bring a softer feminine touch and I am much more allowing of and interested in differences. I am interested in an assimilative integrative psychotherapy in which my home is Gestalt therapy, yet I am open to assimilating and integrating perspectives and practices from other psychotherapies, such as Emotion Focused Therapy and affect regulation, attachment theory, multicultural perspectives, etc. I have immersed myself in couples’ therapy for the past fifteen years, doing lots of training and teaching with my husband Bob Resnick. Together we have created a couple’s therapy that questions the model of marriage in western culture – a model based on fusion. This fusion or “two become one” model requires couples to value confluence over difference and connection and to do more of what they don’t like to please the other. In the model Bob and I developed “we-value connection” not fusion and work to help clients connect to each other and maintain a self. Either extreme is easy, holding both is extremely difficult, however, worth the effort.

Do you think the fact that you are a woman is important in therapy?

Gender can play an enormous role in therapy or none at all. It is truly dependent on the client and the therapist. Feminist therapists see psychological issues through a socio-political and cultural lens and believe that empowerment of the woman is necessary to affect societal change – the key to mental health. If my client is struggling with issues of self-esteem, self-support and power, then the fact that I am a woman can encourage her both by our work and by example. In this case, my womanhood is significant.

Men and women are socialised very differently in western culture. Expression of anger and aggression is seen as “normal and healthy” in men and frequently as a sign of “imbalance” in women. Women are encouraged to talk about their feelings as children and men are characterised as spineless, timid and are feminised in a pejorative way for the same behavior. Depression
sometimes manifests differently in men and women – men often exhibit anger or irritability and women show more sadness, anxiety and an empty mood. If I treat members of the opposite gender, it is imperative that I be knowledgeable and aware of these differences. Gender can also make a difference if a client projects, either positive or negative qualities, onto the male or female therapist. Clients who have been sexually abused, those with a neglectful parent, clients who see mother as goodness and light and father as all evil, and cannot distinguish between past and present experience – transference. In these circumstances gender can make a tremendous difference.

Many times gender plays no role. What is of more importance is the relationship between the client and therapist, regardless of the gender of each: how consistent and trustworthy the connection becomes, how attuned the therapist is to the internal life of the client, how authentically the therapist can bring herself. These qualities are gender absent.

What are your strengths in therapy and what kind of client can you best help?

I am real and I show up. I’m warm and supportive enough, as Laura Perls says, “give as much support as is needed and as little as possible”. In America we place a lot of value on autonomy and independence and tend to think of support as necessary only for the weak. I value support, both that given to me by external sources as well as my internal support. I define support as identification with my own state or knowing my actual experience, behaviour, emotions, sensations and embracing myself, even if I don’t like the state I am in. For many years I had terrible stage-fright and would stand up and try desperately not to show my shaking hands and my loss of cognitive functioning when in front of an audience. All attempts to cover this fear failed. Once I acknowledged my fear out loud, showed my shaking, talked about my blank mind, then, surprisingly, I became less afraid. I supported myself and I am good at supporting others to do the same.

I see process well. I don’t shy away from difficulties or conflict. I work best with the motivated client who is open to looking at herself and has access to her emotional life. Of course all therapists would like to work with such a client. I have a good way of helping clients get interested in themselves. I work well with couples and individuals who are struggling with relationship issues. The balance between being an individual and being a vital part of a couple
continues to frustrate and elude most people. I work with this balance, particularly the ways in which individuals deal with differences. *What* the specific differences are between individuals is usually not very important. *How* individuals deal with these differences is crucial.

*What do you like doing most: therapy, teaching or publishing?*

My life is moving in the direction of doing less private practice with individuals and couples and more teaching in Western and Eastern Europe as well as other parts of the world. I am immensely stimulated by different cultures. By travelling and interacting with people from all over the world, I have shed some of my provincialism. Differences in the meaning of time and punctuality became evident while working in Moscow. Many from Moscow say that “if they can get there, it is sufficient”. For Muscovites, other aspects of life have more relevance; punctuality is not a statement about commitment. I experienced first hand the surprise and joy of participants experiencing being seen and acknowledged in Kyrgyzstan, a country under Soviet law of neglect for so many years. I learned about appreciation for openness and spontaneity from Scandinavian colleagues who see Americans as uninhibited and open and long for that freedom themselves. I struggle with frequent chidings of Americans for being superficial, for simplifying what we say and teach. I found out that I nod my head all the time while doing therapy, to give confirmation, and that is seen as support without discrimination. All of these increase my awareness and cultural understanding and make me a better therapist and person. I will savour these experiences forever.

Being a therapist is much like being an artist – a creative engagement – joining people on their intimate journeys and hopefully making a difference. I also really like the process of supervision and I do a lot of it for a younger generation of Gestalt therapists. I find my supervisees to be motivated and hungry and watching them improve their skills is exhilarating. I wrote an article on supervision highlighting many areas of inquiry: looking at the characterological issues of the client and of therapist, the relationship between therapist and client and/or therapist and supervisor, clinical interventions, the theoretical base that informs practice, etc. I find all these arenas broaden and intensify the work, get the supervisee interested both in the client and their own work and keep me focused and alive in identifying and helping sharpen the skills of my supervisees.
What do you value most about being in a Gestalt community and doing Gestalt therapy?

Gestalt Associates Training Los Angeles has organised a Gestalt Therapy European Summer Residential Training Program for the past forty-three years. I have been involved as faculty for twenty-eight of those forty-three years and as faculty chair for the past twenty-three years. This is the highlight of my year, each year. The value for me is on many levels. First is the community; a place where I belong, where there are kindred spirits and diverse minds, a place of support and challenge. Many of the same people come to this training year after year so familiarity is inherent as is stimulation, difference and change over time. It is a place where I try on leadership (social influence), a role in which I can guide and direct others toward the common goal of learning about Gestalt therapy theoretically, emotionally, clinically, personally. Many of the other trainers on the GATLA faculty sit in on my groups and I on theirs. I receive live, honest and useful feedback from them about my work, both supportive and critical. It is, albeit at times nerve rattling and intense, the most useful and growth producing responses I get all year. We, as established professionals, rarely if ever, get honest and direct feedback on our work, either clinical work or theoretical presentations from our peers. It is extremely helpful.

Where do you look for professional help and/or support if you need it?

I am surrounded by a rich array of Gestalt friends and colleagues both in Los Angeles and abroad. GATLA’s Summer Residential faculty includes trainers from all parts of the world: Moscow, Czech Republic, Australia, Scotland, USA, Ireland, Slovenia, Poland and Kyrgyzstan. I have visited each of them in their cities and many of them have come to me. I can and do call on them for help and support. The first days of our summer residential each year, before participants arrive, is dedicated to the seventeen of us sitting in a circle talking personally about our struggles, our accomplishments, our longings, our unfinished business – our lives. The openness and vulnerability we have with one another is unsurpassed. Of course I am also very lucky to live with a Gestalt therapist. Bob and I can talk about professional as well as personal issues, most of the time without defensiveness or rancour.
What do you see as the future for Gestalt therapy?

I think Gestalt therapy has a robust future. In Eastern Europe Gestalt therapy is thriving. The number of training groups spreading throughout Russia into Siberia and Ukraine is astonishing. I think it is the world-view of Gestalt therapy that makes it so valuable and attractive to therapists and clients alike: the valuing of what is actually real, the valuing of awareness and personal experience, the valuing of responsibility, choicefulness and wholeness. These are views that far surpass “getting well”. Gestalt therapy believes that people are self-regulating and imbues trust in individuals to live their lives based on personal awareness and choice. As these qualities become better known I believe Gestalt therapy will have a worldwide resurgence. We as Gestalt therapists are moving in the direction of being more visible by presenting in mainstream conferences and writing in mainstream journals. We are beginning to infiltrate the research arena (many thanks to Phil Brownell, Ph.D.) and I think our ideas are now an important part of most psychotherapies, even if we are not given direct credit. Bob Resnick is working on a video project to give graduate students worldwide a look at contemporary Gestalt therapy and relate the clinical work to Gestalt theory. I am a part of bringing Gestalt therapy to different parts of the world, to have an influence and to teach our exquisite theory to those who have little access to the Gestalt giants who taught me. The running of GATLA’s Summer Residential for the 43rd summer with participants from twenty-five countries around the world instills hope and joy in me for the future of Gestalt therapy.

What would you tell the next generation?

Listen! Listen! Listen to your clients and then be transparent in your response. Meet the other and enter into a relationship, participate fully in that relationship and allow yourself to be transformed by it. Have a fulfilling primary relationship in your life and have many other relationships that nourish you. Give to your clients your wisdom and learn from them. Teach and do what you love – don’t settle. Be visible and present in all you do.