Gestalt Therapy and Homeorhesis: Evolution with Movement, Discrimination, and Grace

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ABSTRACT | Gestalt therapy, the first (mid-1930s) integrative therapy, was both predicated upon and grounded in a world view that privileges human nature as one with the environment: the “organismic/environmental field.” Frederick (Fritz) S. Perls, a Berlin psychoanalyst, utilized this integration to totally reorganize psychotherapy, incorporating ideas and realities from biology, anthropology/sociology, holism, existentialism, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, behaviorism, Gestalt psychology, field theory, Buber, and many other disciplines. His integration has been evolving, distilling, and changing during his lifetime, after his death, and continues today. Theory, like individual character, can become fixed and anachronistic as field conditions change. What is needed is homeorhesis (a return to a trajectory) and not homeostasis (a return to a set point). Many of Perl’s “crazy” ideas have been now assimilated by most contemporary psychotherapy models. Still to be widely recognized is that the relevant past is accessible in palpable present transactions (dialogic and others) as it interrupts self-regulation in the present.
Preface

Today all over the world, there is a global climate strike. Importantly, mostly young folk are the ones striking out all over the world about the climate crisis on our planet. And if we come (as we say) from a field perspective, then clearly we must be concerned about this issue. We in the Gestalt therapy world are fortunate to have Malcolm Parlett in our community, who is spearheading and trying to raise our awareness of the global issues of climate change, global warming, immigration, migration, politics, and other planetary issues. Many of us are trying to find ways to include and connect these issues with psychotherapy, without going too far to the other extreme and trying to recruit people who are coming for one thing and then having our agenda be about another. Still, the world affects who we are. And hopefully, we can affect how the world is.

Fertile Void

The theme of this cluster, an outgrowth of the theme of the European Association of Gestalt Therapy (EAGT) conference, is the “Fertile Void.” I will be doing a bit of a stretch here, as the fertile void that concerns me is theory building. Good theory building as it evolves, goes into something like a fertile void, which means we have no idea where it is going. It is open (hopefully), which leaves space for creativity, disequilibrium and chaos, wonderful things, and difficulties. We have to be aware of, and sensitive to, all of those possibilities.

The first concept to be treated is related to “character.” Everybody knows that at the individual level, character is the fixed framing, the freezing, of what was a creative and healthy adaptation in one situation, which codifies and continues habitually (below awareness) acontextually and anachronistically (ana = “against” + khronos = “time” → “wrong time”). Originally, it was almost always healthy following the
biological imperative of survival, which is the first business of any living organism. When children survive, they do whatever it takes to survive, and that is healthy.

The problem is when that creative organization becomes fixed, goes below awareness (what learning theorists call procedural memory), and continues regardless of the context: that is the birth of character. It is relieving to many clients to know that what they did, or what they do now, is not just because they are stupid or crazy, but rather that it was a useful, practical, and healthy way to deal with their situation at the time, and might even have helped them to survive. With their resources at the time, it was probably one of the best creative adjustments they were capable of making, and may have saved their life or at least made their lives better. The problem is that it is out of date. It is anachronistic. If you wear a fur coat in February in Siberia, that is healthy: it will keep you warm and might save your life. If you wear that same fur coat in July in Karachi, you might die of heat exhaustion. There is nothing wrong with the fur coat. The ecologists call pollutants “a resource out of place.” A fur coat is a pollutant of your life in July in Karachi, although it can be a lifesaver in February in Siberia. The idea that the thing, in and of itself, is toxic or bad is not true. Let us take a poison like arsenic: if you put it in your tea, you will probably die. But many city water systems cities include a bit of arsenic in their water plants; it serves to clean the water so that people do not get sick. So a pollutant is a resource out of place. Character is a pollutant of self-regulation, and “awareness” can be seen as a solvent of character. Character interrupts an appropriate response, that is, fitting and due the situation. The situation is not just something persons meet outside of themselves. The person is part of that situation. It is not person plus situation; it is person and environment together, the organismic/environmental field together, the situation.

Frederick (Fritz) S. Perls was probably the first psychotherapy theorist who said that one cannot understand any living organism unless one understands that organism in relation to its environment. Living things do not exist outside of an environment. There is a cocreation, a back and forth; they are one. And it is the situation that defines what is due at that moment. I remember talking to Laura Perls about what is due the situation. She pointed out that when what is due, the situation becomes
fixed (notice: character again); what is “due” in one situation turns to “duty” for all situations. Duty is what you are supposed to do acontextually. What is due the situation is of the specific situation of that person, time, and place.

**Evaluating Theory**

Since theory has the same pitfalls as any other “living thing” (evolving entity), even though it is not, per se, a living thing or a biological system. Theory, however, also needs to be self-regulating, inclusive of the changing situation. Theory is “self-regulating” when it is going well because it is sensitive, responsive, and contributing to, the situational/field changes. If theory becomes frozen, if it becomes rigid, it is in a short time out of date because it was born from another time and is now functioning regardless of changes in the world/field. So, in the development of theory, there also needs to be that flexibility to remain fresh by staying with, growing, changing, pruning, deleting, adding, and integrating what fits the situation at that time. Again, that leaves openings for wonderful things to happen, and it also leaves open possibilities for difficulties.

The metric for measuring theories is not, “Is a theory right or wrong?” It is virtually impossible to determine whether a theory is right or wrong. What we can determine is whether a theory is useful or not. Does it generate testable hypotheses? Does it follow the Law of Parsimony, meaning the simplest explanation rather than the more complex? Does it follow Occam’s razor, which is like the Law of Parsimony but a little bit different: it is about the least number of assumptions. So, if you are being parsimonious, if you have the simplest explanation, with the least number of assumptions, then is that theory useful? If you do not become invested with the idea that your theory is right, and other theories are wrong, then you can stay with the useful elasticity and the functionality of the theory rather than stiffen into a dogma or fixed creed. A Native American medicine man once said something like, “I will hold no philosophy that will not grow corn.” He was talking about the practicality and usefulness of a philosophy or a theory. If you are interested in philosophy for the intellectual stimulation, for the discussion/arguments for who is right, who is wrong, and so on, that is one issue. If you are in
interested in it for its functionality, then it has to be able to “grow corn.” It has to be useful; it has to be able to inform actual clinical work in order to be appropriate as a theory of psychotherapy.

**Homeostasis and Homeorhesis**

We shall now address a concept that is not widely known. Everybody knows the word and the concept of homeostasis. Homeostasis is the continuing rebalancing back to a *set point*. A typical example is a thermostat: if you set it at 20°C, then the heat goes on when it goes below 20°C to bring it back up to 20°C; and if it goes over 20°C (and if you have air conditioning), the air conditioning goes on to bring it back to 20°C. Homeostasis is a mechanical system that returns to a set point; in this example, to 20°C. That we all know. Unfortunately, F. Perls did not really know that. He did not know there was more to it than that when he was writing about homeostasis; he did not actually mean that Gestalt therapy’s goal was homeostasis. He did mean balance, but not back to a set point but rather to a *trajectory of balance* as a result of self-regulation within the person’s environment. Although Perls had the correct concept, he lacked the ability to express this concept through language.

Unfortunately, Gestalt therapy has sometimes been confused with being mechanistic, as if it were trying to return people to a set point. We are not trying to do so. What Perls was talking about was a biological system, a living system. The word for that is “homeorhesis”; he did not know that word, as it was not coined until 1941 by Conrad Hal Waddington. It is, still today, not a well-known concept. Until then, homeostasis was usually used to describe both mechanical systems and living systems. Homeorhesis is a biological/living system and encompasses a *return to a trajectory*. It is not a return to a set point. Take, for example, self-regulation: in my understanding of Gestalt therapy, it is not (and has never been)

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1. “Homeorhesis is a term coined by C. H. Waddington to describe a property of a dynamical system to return to a particular trajectory after an external perturbation or despite the continuous presence of random noise. . . . It is thus a generalization of the concept of homeostasis to nonstationary systems. By definition, experimental studies of homeorhesis involve gathering large amounts of temporal statistics, which makes them more difficult, and thus less common, than those of the well-known property of homeostasis” (Chuang, Zak, and Leibler 2019, 14852).
part of a one-person psychology; it is always regulation within the person’s environment, within the world that the organism lives—the organismic/environmental field.

The perspective of the person interacting with her world is, of course, only one perspective among many valid ones. It happens, however, to be the perspective in which most people coming to therapy are usually interested: that of how they are involved/interacting with their world. This is legitimate. Perls was the first therapist I know to have asserted that, to understand people, one has to understand them in relation to their world: again, the organismic/environmental field. He was influenced, of course, by Wilhelm Reich, one of his analysts. Reich was the first analyst to ask, “Why is this patient telling me this now”? Though clearly not yet dialogic, Reich had some concern that this connection or this engagement between patient and analyst was affecting what was happening there. The American psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan was also interested in what he called social psychiatry. He recognized that human beings are relational; within their world, they are not isolated and encapsulated psyches: the idea of cocreation. The Hungarian psychiatrist Sándor Ferenczi brought up the issue of authenticity between analyst and patient within the room. Perls was always, always talking about the organismic/environmental field, meaning the person in relation to his environment; and about the way the experience of life is cocreated. The focus in much of psychotherapy is about the agency or passivity of the individual, because that is where individuals have jurisdiction. They do not always know they have jurisdiction; they sometimes interrupt and do not use the jurisdiction they have, and they certainly do not have jurisdiction over the environment. They cannot first change the environment and then deal with it, though acting within the domain of their jurisdiction may affect the environment. They have the jurisdiction—the potency, the agency—in their part of the interaction with the environment. While they can affect the environment, they cannot change it and then deal with it, as they would like it to be; they have to deal with it as it is (including trying to change it, having an impact and an effect on it).

Theory is sometimes seen as something kind of lofty and abstract, and it can be those things. But all theory really is, is some person’s phenomenological organization; some people’s meaning-making of how
they see the world, organize it, and put it together. When they take
their phenomenological organization and write it down—voilà—now it
is a theory. It is no different from any other phenomenological mean-
ing-making system.

1920s and Onward

In the 1920s, F. and L. Perls were engaged in organizing their phenomenological world, their theory, in a rich and creative era in Germany, similar to Paris in the 1940s. They were involved with existentialism and Gestalt psychology (L. Perls, especially), Holism (through Goldstein), Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, Korzybski’s general semantics (i.e., linguistics), behaviorism, and more. Buber and Tillich, as well as several Gestalt psychologists, were all teaching where L. Perls was pursing her doctorate at the then called Universität Frankfurt am Main (now Goethe University Frankfurt). And, of course, both L. and F. Perls were deeply involved with psychoanalysis. The list goes on and on. He brought in, from his point of view, drama and theater (Max Reinhardt); and she brought in music, literature, movement, and breathing (Elsa Gindler). And all of this was their selective organizational data bank for the creation of the theory in the 1920s and 1930s for *Ego, Hunger and Aggression*, which, although finished in 1939, was not published until 1947 (see Perls 1991). Later, with Paul Goodman’s substantial involvement in reorganizing and collaborating with the manuscript that F. Perls already had written and brought to New York from South Africa in 1946, there evolved the seminal book *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* (Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman 1951). Both of these books were *their organization, at their time, in their era, in their world*. We have a responsibility to honor that reality but not get stuck with it. F. Perls also honored this evolving process: *Gestalt Therapy* (1951) was more than and different from *Ego, Hunger and Aggression* (1939). F. Perls did not stop there; he kept going, and so did L. Perls.

Jean-Marie Robine and Charles Bowman (2019) have edited a recently found manuscript (consisting of some 50 pages), entitled *Psychopathology of Awareness*, which F. Perls had written on an old typewriter circa 1965.
The edited volume also includes “comments by contemporary Gestalt therapists” (see, e.g., Resnick 2019, for complementary material to the present article). As Perls's ideas are changing from *Ego, Hunger and Aggression* (1939), to *Gestalt Therapy* (Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, 1951), to the beginning of this newest manuscript, *Psychopathology of Awareness* (1965), the movement keeps going, no doubt until the day he dies. When we read now what the writing was in 1965, there is nothing terribly new in it. If it seems quite usual, *it was not usual in 1965!* Just as the subtitle he gave to *Ego, Hungry and Aggression*—*A Revision of Freud’s Theories*—was a heresy at the time he was writing in the 1930s. Although that subtitle was dropped from future editions (but replaced in Wysong’s edition of 1991), Perls continued to the day he died with his evolving, “outrageous” ideas. He continued to work with theory, so that in 1965 what he was saying was ground breaking, through the eyes of 2019 it is all well known. Ironically, as psychoanalysis decades before denounced most of Perls’s 1939 and 1951 publications, now some Gestalt therapists were (and still are) denouncing most of his 1965 ideas, and later ones, as “Fritz’s California craziness”; mostly, however, these ideas are seen as quite reasonable now. Much of it is the backbone of today’s mainstream psychotherapy: between 1965 and today, most of those “crazy ideas” have been integrated into mainstream psychotherapy. And that which seemed heresy at the time is now considered normal, not only for contemporary “relational” and “intersubjective” psychoanalysis, but even for cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). For example, CBT, in the old days before it was called CBT, was just behaviorism and previously about Stimulus → Black Box → Response. If you looked at the stimulus schedule, and then looked at the responses, that was the whole system. The behaviorists at the time said the “black box” was unknowable. Their notation for the “black box” was “O.” Modern CBT is now looking at the organism, the “O,” within the “black box,” and looking at *how* that organism organizes the stimuli to make meaning, so that their responses are different if I am the “O,” and if you are the “O.” The differential has to do with the fixed ways that I make meaning, and you make meaning. In our Gestalt language, that would be fixed perceptual Gestalts: fixed ways of organizing and making meaning, which is half of what character is. The other half of character is about fixed ways of responding. But we tend to
forget that at least half, and maybe even more, of character is the fixed organization of perceptions. That has been represented (repackaged) as schema theory: fixed ways of organizing and making meaning. That concept, heretical “back in the day,” has now been absorbed and integrated into many kinds of therapy.

**Assimilation of F. Perls’s Ideas into Mainstream Psychotherapy**

Here are some additional ideas of Perls, once “crazy and heretical,” which have been assimilated into much of mainstream psychotherapy.

1. **Organismic/Environmental Field**

In Perls’s early days, classic psychoanalysis was only interested in the individual psyche. The punctuation of study was the interpretation of that person’s individual psyche: unconscious, unresolved unconscious conflicts. For the behaviorist at the time, as has been mentioned, it was the stimulus, the unknowable (and not important) “black box” and the response. That was the extent of behaviorism at that time from Watsonian and Pavlovian points of view. Both contemporary psychoanalysis and behaviorism have given up this stance, and both are now interested in the patients’ involvement with their world as well as, for some, especially the intersubjective field. Almost all modern therapies now recognize that you cannot understand any living thing (especially human beings) unless you understand them within, and as part of their environment. They are a part of the system; they are not just meeting an outside system or field; they are an important element of the field. This is a fundamental paradigmatic shift for both psychoanalysis and CBT.

2. **Aggression**

Perls maintained that aggression was a biological necessity for sustaining life. He was unfortunately using “aggression” in a narrow sense, meaning “going towards,” going out toward the environment to fulfill needs from biological basics (air, food, and water) to issues of contact, connection, and withdrawal. English, not being his first language, he did
not understand how strong the connotative meaning of “aggression” is that language and in many others: a figure connected to a ground all about anger, hostility, and hurtfulness. To avoid being misunderstood, he probably would have been well advised to use words and concepts like “movement towards,” or “experimenting,” or even “action.” He was positing a life force, as all major theories of development and psychotherapy have done (Freud, sexuality; Adler, power; Jung, transcendental experience; etc.).

3. Therapeutic Relationship

Today, most therapists are familiar with the research evidence that 30 percent of the variance in psychotherapeutic success is the importance of the therapeutic relationship. In the early days, the behaviorists were not concerned about the relationship between therapist and patient. Similarly, psychoanalysis back then was only interested in the transference relationship. Hence the blank screen and the encouraging and supporting projection followed by the interpretation of those projections. The technique of classical psychoanalysis was “free association,” and the interpretation of the “transference neurosis” was the curative methodology. Of course, the interpretation was based on the phenomenological organization of the therapist, or the theorist that the therapist embraced. It had little to do with the person. It was preset: “I know more than you about you than you do.” My meaning-making prisms (or those of the theorist I embrace) are essentially going to colonize your meaning for you. Perls was interested in respecting and honoring the phenomenology and meaning-making of the client. If you want to know what something means to the other person, the only source of finding that out is going to that other person—rather than going to my theory, or the theory of whatever theorist I am embracing, and making a meaning for you based on who I am, or on who he or she is. The idea of taking seriously the clients’ meaning, and working with that meaning, was unheard of back in the day. It is now a fairly commonplace practice.

4. Dialogue, Transference, and Manualized Relationships

That it is not just about a mechanical (or manualized) relationship, or a transference relationship between client and therapist, is another fairly
commonplace idea in mainstream psychotherapy today. There is something important and potentially useful that happens between us, that comes up, that emerges from the cocreation of the engagement between client and therapist’s meaning-making. For many, it is a form of dialogue, which is something that Perls brought to the world of therapy. Dialogue is rich with discovery and has its own healing properties. To be seen, to be received, to be heard, and to be responded to is frequently, in itself, healing.

5. Existential Anxiety

Perls contributed to legitimizing existential anxiety. Before that, existential anxiety was something that you either avoided in therapy, or if the person had a problem with it, you tried somehow to fix or ameliorate it. It is not fixable! Perl’s normalized view is that existential anxiety is real; it is appropriate for human beings who are reflective and understand that we all have a time stamp with an expiration date. We just do not know when that date is. But we all have a time stamp, and we will live until we die. And, for Perls, therapy can help with how to live with that reality, rather than trying to morph it into something else, to change it, to get rid of it, to fix it. He depathologized existential anxiety and made it part of the human condition. This is part of Gestalt therapy’s existential ground.

6. Phenomenological Respect and Interpretation

When you are dealing with taking seriously the phenomenology, the meaning-making, of the patient or client, then you are no longer relying on interpretation as a major way of dealing with clients. In many psychotherapeutic circles, this is revolutionary. Certainly, at a fundamental level, all meaning-making is interpretation; therefore, as Perls asserted, all theory is interpretation. Theory, also according to Perls, is projection. It has to be. The projection of my organization (meaning-making) is different from your organization (meaning-making), and that difference in our organizations (whatever the subject of our organizing) resides in me, and it resides in you—in our different phenomenological meaning-makings loci. And that me-ness, and that you-ness is the projection. It sometimes can be accurate. But it is a projection, whether accurate or not, when I impose connecting my ground to your figure and declare
that THE meaning. So while, on the one hand, we realize that almost all meaning-making is an interpretation of sorts, when we are talking about making meaning for someone else's behavior or feelings or bodily states, when we are making those kinds of causative explanatory interpretations, we as Gestalt therapists only want to do so predicated on two things.

First, we want to make meaning minimally; it is not a major part of Gestalt therapy, but we do it sometimes. To quote the late Sonia March Nevis, when we do make an interpretation, we need “to hold it lightly” and own it. By that, she meant “to hold it lightly as yours”: it is my configuration, my speculation, my extrapolation—and it may or may not fit for you. It lives over here (me), the locus is here (me), rather than as if I am describing you; then the locus is there, the object of the interpretation. Even if “holding it lightly,” with the built-in stereotypic hierarchical organization of client and therapist, one is still to be careful, because many clients will just swallow and agree because you are the therapist, and they frequently think (and sometimes hope) that you know better than they do. And those clients will find a way to justify the taking in of your interpretation. Meaning is in the relationship between figure and ground; it is not in the figure, and it is not in the ground. When an interpretation is made, I am using my ground to connect to your figure, thereby colonizing your meaning with mine. There will also be some clients at the other end of the spectrum who, no matter how right on you are, will immediately go to a “No.” They will quickly go to a “No” without considering, just as the one who swallows it whole without considering. The similarity between both people is the lack of considering, tasting, experimenting, finding out: Does any of that really resonate with my experience, or not?

7. Perls, the Man

Perls was no saint. He was an imperfect person. He had many difficulties, many personal difficulties, many behavioral difficulties; he was in some ways a lovable and irritating person. He was also a giant among those who contributed to creating modern psychotherapy. Arguably, Perls himself (after Freud) has probably influenced mainstream psychotherapy today more than any other theorist or psychotherapist (see the earlier examples).
Gestalt therapy is arguably also the first (mid-1930s) integrative therapy which was predicated and grounded on both a worldview and a view of human nature in interaction with the environment—the “organismic/environmental field.” Perls, a Berlin psychoanalyst who trained with Karen Horney, Wilhelm Reich, Otto Fenichel, Kurt Goldstein, and others, began totally to reorganize psychotherapy, integrating ideas and realities from biology, anthropology/sociology, Goldstein’s holism, existentialism, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, behaviorism, Gestalt psychology, field theory, Buber’s dialogue, Nietzsche, linguistics, movement, breathing, theater, and more. His integration, at the time, was evolving, growing, distilling, and changing; it was so both during his lifetime and after his death. Theory, like individual character, can become fixed and anachronistic as field conditions change. What is needed is homeorhesis (return to a trajectory), not homeostasis (return to a set point).

Today’s integration of contemporary Gestalt therapy demonstrates a powerful applied phenomenological, field theoretical, and dialogic approach emphasizing process and awareness. The relevant past is accessible in palpable present transactions (dialogic and others), as it interrupts self-regulation in the present. Good therapy is turning suffering to flourishing, or at least to resilience. Perls could be cantankerous, difficult, and weird. He could also be brilliant, sweet, and compassionate. He was a very complex guy.

Theories and Gestalt Therapy Theory

Theories are useful until they are no longer useful; when new data comes in, one has to change the paradigm. For example, several years ago some “crazy” Australian came up with a theory that some ulcers came from a bacterium. Everybody knew that stomach ulcers were from stress. Stomach ulcers were from emotional upset. Everyone knew that. Well it turned out that he was right: some kinds of stomach ulcers are bacterial. They have nothing to do with stress. This was also the case with shingles: people were once convinced, theoretically, that shingles was an emotional reaction to stress or to anxiety, or something like that. And, it turns out, it is related to the herpes virus. Of course, it may be triggered by stress. Biology can always be triggered by stress.
There are two kinds of changes for theory. Type 1 change is what has already been described, wherein F. and L. Perls made an organization of the elements in the world. F. Perls was clear and emphatic: there is nothing new in Gestalt therapy; what is new is the organization. What is new is the Gestalt: what F. and L. Perls were doing concerned how existentialism, Gestalt psychology, holism, phenomenology, dialogism, psychoanalysis, and all the other components were organized in the 1930s and the 1940s. Within Gestalt therapy, there is lots of room for difference. It is a wide and tall tent, supportive of many different integrations, emphases, and techniques.

**Type I and Type II Changes**

From a Gestalt therapy perspective, we start with an existential base, a foundation of existentialism that has to do with freedom and responsibility within a situation. It is not open and unbridled freedom and responsibility but freedom and responsibility within the limits of the situation. It has to do with the responsibility to make decisions with incomplete information and often with an array of imperfect choices. That is essentially the existential base. Then there are three pillars: field theory, phenomenology, and dialogue (Resnick 1995), which make up the poles that the Gestalt therapy tent hangs on, on the ground of existentialism. Within that tent, people can organize in many different ways. Some people will organize and emphasize working around the body. Others will work through metaphor. Others will work through dialogue. Others will work through experiments, including “empty chairs.” Others will work through fantasy or dreams or movement. There are many ways to organize the elements of Gestalt therapy as well as new elements that fit within those parameters of the three pillars and the existential base, and there is room for everybody’s integration within that tent.

The techniques of Gestalt therapy are endless, and they are the least important part of Gestalt therapy. Our philosophical foundations and our methodology are the heart of our theory and clinical work. The method of Gestalt therapy is awareness, and any technique that facilitates awareness is good. Some Gestalt therapists privilege certain techniques and emphases, while others favor other organizations and
techniques. As I said almost forty years ago, “You could stop using any
technique that any Gestalt therapist has ever used, and go right on doing
excellent Gestalt therapy” (Resnick 1982). Gestalt therapy is not defined
by experiments, empty chairs, dreams, and so on, but by existentialism,
field theory, phenomenology, and dialogue. Our methodology is aware-
ness, and our technology is anything that facilitates awareness. Starting
as a creative leap when some client and therapist were stuck, a technique
today is a repetition of a creative leap that worked out so well in a similar
situation that we use it again—judiciously, we hope. These are Type I
changes.

The existential ground and the three pillars constitute some kind of
worldview. It does not mean that Gestalt therapy’s worldview is rigid. If
something comes along that is so compelling, then we have to change
our worldview (Type II change). But that is a different issue from making
changes, or rearranging emphasis, or rearranging how we are working
with parts that are already within the tent, or can be integrated within
the existential base and the three pillars. If it is a paradigmatic shift, then
one is really changing some of the foundation. And if reality is compel-
ling, then it would be good to change the worldview and the founda-
tional view.

Today, for example, I have interest and caution in looking at the “new”
phenomenology—atmospheres, and “quasi things.” I only know a little
about it, but I have some caution. It may turn out to be useful. But it is
also a paradigmatic switch, because up to now, the idea was the sensorial
world: what you “know” is through the five senses, and everything else
is fantasy. It may or may not be true, but if you do not know it through
your senses, then you cannot really know it. You can speculate; you have
assumptions, so you run into all those issues about Occam’s razor, about
the Law of Parsimony, about whether there is something that pre-exists
in the field outside of and prior to anyone experiencing it through one
or more of the five senses. Parsimoniously, “atmospheres” can also be
explained much more simply than by attributing emotions to inhabit
and reside “in the field.” For example, horror movies use darkness, shad-
ows, and “ominous” music (slow and deep tones) to trigger emotions of
excitement and fear, just as dark clouds overhead can be the harbinger of
rain to come. These are learned reactions to a matrix of sensorial stimuli:
excitement and fear are in the person, cocreated with the interaction
with the field. If, however, there is some evidence that atmospheres can
exist external to people’s experience, then I think we have to go with some vigilance and some positive critical acumen to see whether the notion fits the world, our world, or whether it does not. I support exploring atmospheres, but I do not want to swallow whole or prematurely. I want to learn more, and I would hope we all do just that. That is only one example; there are many other things that people try and bring into Gestalt therapy. If it is an organization within the current Gestalt therapy framework, there is room for all. If it concerns a change in some of the basic fundamentals, then I think we have to go slowly and more cautiously.

The idea of homeorhesis is that we want our theories to stay fluid enough and flexible enough to be able to be regulating with the world as it is changing. On the other hand, we do not want license for “anything goes.” We do have an organizing, integrated, and integrating core. Without this core, we just become an eclectic and superficial set of techniques that does not have an organizing worldview. In some places, Gestalt therapy still has that distorted reputation. At our best, we are an integrative approach and not an eclectic one.

*Societal “Character” Structures*

Is it the character of a person, or the “character” of a society, which in the lexicon of sociology and anthropology are called “institutions”? Let us take, for example, the “institution” of marriage. The Western model of marriage is a frozen organization that was probably a good fit, a creative adjustment, thousands of years ago, but that does not work very well for most people today. Still, we attempt to follow it; it is not unlike trying as an adult to wear shoes that were good fitting when we were 6 years old. Ouch!

When Rita Resnick and I are teaching Couples Therapy, we frequently call it “Two Become One,” which is the Western fusion model of marriage or, as we prefer to point out, “Two Become One and Then There Are None.” Even the terrible divorce statistics are misleading, in that they are more optimistic than the reality. In most Western countries, 55 percent of first marriages (and 75 percent of second marriages) explode and end in rupture and divorce. Evidently, after one divorce, the second divorce comes more easily. The literature would have you think, then, that 45 percent of first marriages are a “success.” Wrong! If staying together
(no matter what the situation) is the criterion for “success,” then the former is probably true. If, however, overall mutual nourishment (albeit, always imperfect) is the criterion, then you really have to rethink all of that. If you consider the 45 percent in this sociological/anthropological institution—a fusion model of marriage (aka, societal “character”)—we have found the majority to be what we call “The Secretly Miserably Married.” These are couples who stay together because one or both of them are terrified to be alone, or they are afraid of the financial hardships of divorce, or they do it “for the kids,” or they do it following religious introjects, or they do it to avoid social stigma, or they do to avoid being a “failure.” The Secretly Miserably Married are those who implode. While 55 percent of first marriages explode and rupture, some unknown large percentage of the 45 percent of marriages that stay together implode into The Secretly Miserably Married, heralding depression, anger, bitterness, substance abuse, illness, and all kinds of issues that result.

Homeostasis and Homeorhesis Revisited

At every level of organization and complexity, the idea of homeorhesis is that of an ongoing, living, and evolving process organized around the changing field, including the person who is of that field in the service of maintaining a trajectory. Differently, homeostasis is about having arrived at a goal: something that works for that moment in that situation; you then codify and stay with that organization without regard to changing contexts, all in the service of returning to a set point, even though in some situations the world around is changing, and what worked there does not work here. Different explanations have been held by different cultures in an attempt to make meaning of people’s difficulties: the humors were out of balance; the demons were possessing the person; a disease that was doing it; somehow crossing the gods was doing it; your mother did it to you (how patriarchal is that? blame the mother!); the unconscious is doing it (“it is not me; it is my unconscious”); it was the external world (“the cookie made me eat it”); the field made me do it; the atmosphere made me do it; and so on.

There were many attributions of responsibility that were sometimes within me, but not of me (e.g., humors, demons, disease, unconscious). Other attributions were outside of me (e.g., cookie, field, gods,
In the 1960s and the 1970s, there was an emphasis on differentiation and individualism in Gestalt therapy, which was in response to the overly conforming homogenization of the 1950s postwar years. That polarity had some danger of overcorrection: perhaps the swing back “to the field” is now approaching the threshold of overcorrection. In what is to me something of an overcorrection, now it is not my mother, not the demons within me, or even my unconscious, but rather the field (i.e., “the cookie made me eat it”). It is that the field is processing me. The pendulum of the locus of responsibility has shifted from within to without. Of course, the reality is that it goes both ways: cocreated by the person as part of the field, and the rest of the field. The issue is: what part of it is my jurisdiction, where do I have agency and potency, and what part is being sourced from the field in this cocreation? If it is true that I am processed by the field (I know nobody is suggesting this, that strongly), then I am doomed. There is not a darn thing I can do about it. I need some responsibility in order to have some authority. The authority would be within my jurisdiction. I cannot change the world, but I can change how I deal with the world. If I how I deal with the world includes my interruptions to self-regulation, then the therapy can focus on those interruptions. In the past few years, I have threatened to write an article called: “The Part of The Field, Formerly Known As ‘Me’” (with a nod to “The Artist Formerly Known as Prince”).

Homeorhesis is that spiral that keeps rebalancing. Balance requires movement. Character is a pollutant of self-regulation; awareness is the solvent of character.

Physics and Psychotherapy

A long time ago (1965–1966), after concluding my internship at the University of California at Los Angeles Neuropsychiatric Institute (when I met Jim Simkin and F. Perls), I went back to the University of Florida, where I was finishing my doctorate because I wanted to be sure to complete my dissertation. I took a half-time appointment in the University Counseling Center, and a half-time appointment teaching in the Department of Psychology. Every day I would go to the Counseling Center building, and down the hall to the coffee machine that dispensed a paper cup, which I then filled with hot coffee, almost to the brim.
Usually I would hold the coffee cup by the sides (no handles), being careful not to spill coffee and burn my fingers. I always spilled a little.

One day, as I am getting my coffee, the Director of the Counseling Center, Harry Grater comes up behind me and says: “Oh, you’re going down to the Counseling Center; let’s go and walk together.” And as we are walking and talking, I am not paying attention to the cup. I have to hold it lightly by the top rim because the sides are too hot, and I cannot watch the level of the coffee and talk to Harry. If I hold it too firmly from the top, the paper cup, softened by the hot coffee will collapse; and if I hold it too lightly, the cup will fall out of my hands. I just hold it lightly by the top and pay little attention to it, and I keep walking and talking with Harry. When we get to the door, I realize I have not spilled any coffee.

I was fascinated. I then experimented with a paper cup of hot coffee, walking with it, first trying not to spill anything. Inevitably, almost always there would be a little spill. Then I would try it the other way, just walk holding the paper cup lightly from the top and not looking at it. Immediately, I noticed that the difference was in movement. When I was not looking and holding the cup lightly, I could not see the water. I was not trying to control it by trying to counterbalance the movement; I was allowing the movement. Trying to restrict and control movement is what prevents balance and creates spillage. Balance requires movement. YES! Not quite Sir Isaac Newton’s supposed experimentation with an apple, gravity and the earth’s gravitation, but really important. I frequently talk about the person in the circus on the high wire. You will never see people standing still on any wire. If they stand still, they fall. In order to stay balanced, you have to keep moving. This is reminiscent of the famous quotation, “Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance, you must keep moving,” which Albert Einstein wrote on February 5, 1930 in a letter to his son Eduard.

The concept of balance requiring movement became an important concept to me, adding to my understanding of Gestalt therapy in general, and of self-regulation in particular. Balance requires movement, awareness requires movement and difference, differentiation requires movement, relating requires movement, connection (contact and withdrawal) require movement. If you try to control and prevent
movement, you make balance (to a trajectory) impossible. Try walking across a four-foot-by-six-foot board on the ground; for most of us, there is no problem: we do not fall off the board. Put that same four-foot-by-six-foot board between two fifty-story buildings, and most of us will fall. The difference is trying to control your movement when you are 500 feet in the air, and not needing to when the board is on the floor.

While homeostasis is trying to keep to a fixed set point with as little movement as possible, homeorhesis is allowing the movement so the system keeps rebalancing to a trajectory, and not to a set point.

**Conclusion: Gestalt Therapy’s History and Future**

We in the world of Gestalt therapy have a colorful history—perhaps sometimes a bit too “colorful,” especially with regard to Frederick Perls in terms of negative and positive aspects. Although not without some imperfections, I believe we have made unbelievable contributions to mainstream psychotherapy today, for which Gestalt therapy rarely, if ever, gets credit. I do not know that our branding of Gestalt therapy is so important that we need credit—or even the words “Gestalt therapy” need credit—if, in fact, we are having such a pervasive and profound impact on the world of mainstream psychotherapy. This credit/vindication would, of course, feel good to many of us, and yet is not crucial to maintaining our trajectory.

I want to support homeorhesis at the characterological level of the individual in the service of self-regulation within that person’s world. I also want to support homeorhesis at the level of Gestalt therapy theory building: evolving and changing, keeping it responsive to the cocreation with the changing situation. That “healthy” spiral (“healthy,” meaning due and fitting the situation) keeps moving to maintain our trajectorial balance. Any changes not congruent with our current worldview, and currently being considered, must be carefully evaluated through the prisms of our fundamentals, all the while that we stay open to the possibility of changing our worldview when new ideas are compelling. Again, we must be open to considering new information and experiences, while...
remaining prudent about changing our fundamentals in accommodating new ideas and practices. Here’s to homeorhesis for all of us.

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REFERENCES


