Robert W. Resnick introduces the video by saying that he has not written much about his work over his forty-five-plus year career as a therapist and teacher/trainer and wanted to use these videos to make up for that fact by documenting some of his learning and insights. He succeeds admirably.

Resnick describes himself as being incredibly lucky to have met and been trained by Frederick (“Fritz”) Perls and Jim Simkin (an early master of Gestalt therapy), and then being asked by Perls to initiate teaching workshops in Europe. Resnick has continued with this teaching for more than forty-five years (along with Rita Resnick). It has given him what he calls a “catbird seat” to observe developments in psychotherapy theory and practice in the United States and Europe, and to perceive and contribute to the evolution of Gestalt therapy. Being exposed to such different practitioners as Perls (brilliant, bold, and seemingly erratic) and Simkin (precise, thorough, and meticulous) allowed him to develop his own style of practice and as he describes it: to be himself and show up fully with patients/clients. The scenarios he shares are clearly more in the Simkin mode.

Resnick’s description of his understanding of Gestalt therapy is clear and concise and follows quite logically. I am not certain that there is a lot new here, but he uses consistently engaging and compelling ways of describing it, no doubt resulting from all his experience doing presentations to myriad training groups. Resnick plainly regrets that Gestalt therapy was seen in the early days as giving therapists license to do whatever they “felt” without the foundation of truly understanding theory. Another of his motivations is to correct that misapplication and misperception.

He opens by talking about the tripod of foundational support of Gestalt therapy following from existentialism: field theory, phenomenology, and dialogue. Field theory postulates that everything is related and in flux. Phenomenology emphasizes that humans are meaning-making beings. Dialogue is where the phenomenology of one person meets the phenomenology of the other. The interaction of therapist and patient is the meeting of two phenomenologies. Resnick emphasizes that Gestalt therapy is much more interested in process than in content, and that it is not focused on change per se but in choice and increased choice through increased awareness. Process is defined by Resnick as the patterns and sequences used to make meaning and react to the world. The path to awareness is to notice the difference (the boundary). Insight strives to understand the then and there, while awareness is in the service of attaining new and relevant data in the here and now.

Another tenet of Gestalt therapy is that all living things are self-regulating. Children make the best adjustment (self-regulation) to whatever environment they find themselves placed in or stuck in.
Psychoanalysis attempts to understand the present by understanding the past. Resnick contrasts that with Gestalt therapy, which seeks to understand the past by understanding the present. An ineffective way of relating in the present may have been a reasonable way of relating in the past, especially in toxic situations in that past. Habits are behavior below the level of awareness, solidified and frozen. Character is defined in the habits of how I see the world, and how I respond to the world. In ineffective responses, character is interrupting self-regulation. Gestalt therapy is an interruption of the character interruption.

With that introduction, Resnick presents several instances of his Gestalt therapy interactions/interventions with patients/trainees. He stays true to his theory and uses that grounding with the full person of Bob Resnick showing up. He seems very present and begins each encounter patient, open, and joining. In the example “Coming Home,” Resnick focuses on the issue of feeling or not feeling free. He notices changes and invites the patient to explore those changes. He stays with the here and now, following the patient’s process meticulously. Resnick notes the patient’s fleeting interest and attraction in the moment followed by the patient quickly losing interest or energy. By way of some judicious self-disclosure, Resnick offers some reassurance and increases connection (contact). Again, the process of focusing on the patient’s present experience, and of highlighting the contrast of feeling free but lonely, allows meaning for the patient to come into awareness. The emphasis is on a choice the patient has in this present moment. The patient chooses a closer connection and a staying with the current reality, and so has a powerful experience he calls “coming home.”

In the therapy illustration entitled, “A Rose on the Grave of My Family,” Resnick highlights the delicate balance of inviting, while not pushing or intruding upon the person. Resnick credits Laura Perls with saying that work can be divided as support work or contact work. He also quotes her as saying: “Give as much support as needed but as little as possible.” In the beginning of his work with this patient, Resnick shares a personal reaction that instigates her to look at a critical issue: not deserving to have any needs. With that belief, she chooses not to put out any needs in the group. Resnick is gently and patiently probing, but he repeatedly gives the patient a choice of whether to look at the behavior and thus at the issue. And he invites the alternative of being out there with needs, with support, saying that he recognizes how much of a stretch it is for her to be in the here and now. The patient chooses with ambivalence to stay “in the center” and thus working the issue. In the end, he asks her to reflect on how she has done and is doing. She says, “you drilled [the day before] into this blocked iron square that I locked and threw away the key long ago.” There is palpable relief on her part.
These representations are clear, powerful, and dramatic examples of the principles elucidated in the introduction and an excellent modeling of a skilled Gestalt therapy style in the here and now. One experiences, in real time, the shift in the self-regulation and the expansion of choice for the individual. There is much to see and learn within these videos for the therapist new to Gestalt therapy, and some elegant reminders for the experienced Gestalt therapist. It also is a pleasing balance to the sometimes bombastic style of Fritz Perls.

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