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The Last Time I Saw Fritz

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Bainbridge Island, Washington, USA

Zen is not merely an exotic practice imported from the Orient; it is the constantly fresh realization of True Nature everywhere and at every time. So, it may be expected that sparks of Zen will be found in all cultures. Hence, having been engaged with Zen practice since 1964, the author reminisces here about how he turned to Zen after his study of Gestalt psychology and his encounter with Gestalt therapy in the person of Fritz Perls. Gestalt therapy as usually practiced is not Zen, the author concludes. But if it clears the way for a glimmer of the Self which has no need of therapy, then Gestalt is excellent preparation for Zen.

THE LAST time I saw Perls as a psychotherapist was when he told our therapy group, in a matter-of-fact way, that he was going to Israel to paint pictures. Tidying up the situation, Perls gave those in the group who wanted to continue a choice between two Gestalt-trained therapists. A couple of the women in the group got rather tearful, expressing an anticipated sense of loss which was probably what we all felt. Perhaps as periodic resolution of therapee transference and/or as encouragement toward mature independence, Perls had told us in previous sessions to experimentally dialogue with (our individual personification of) "Dr. Perls" in an empty chair opposite. Now, in the last session, he reminded us of such things, and admonished us that the point of Gestalt therapy was to become freer and more self-regulating, so this sniffing was no compliment to him as a therapist. Still, I think he also appreciated the evidence that he was going to be missed.

Later he returned from Israel and other places, took up residence at Esalen in Big Sur, California, and became famous. I stopped by Big Sur several times to see him while on my way north or south.

He was no longer Frederick S. Perls, M.D., Ph.D. He was *FRITZ*, the laid-back, white-bearded guru, like a model for Robert Crumb's cartoon, Mr. Natural. The last time I saw him as Fritz or Mr. Natural, we played a game of chess, discovered we both had the same birthday, talked about the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, and compared Fritz' views with the views of Goldstein and others close to the Gestalt school of Wertheimer and Koehler. We learned each of us had had similar life-changing "mystic" experiences, and we talked a little about how everyday life could be expressed as either Gestalt or Zen. (A short visit with a Zen Master in Japan had disappointed him; but since he once reminded me that all psychotherapists are not equally insightful, I reminded him that the same was true of Zen Masters.)

On the wall was a poster announcing an upcoming workshop at Esalen to be given by a popular but rather superficial "trainer" or "facilitator." At one point, Fritz indicated the poster and asked what I thought. I glanced at it, looked back at Fritz and shrugged. Maybe I made

a face also. Fritz nodded and said "I'm glad you don't lump me with people like that, just because I'm here." It was the first time I realized he cared about my respect for him. He knew I had taken to Zen after he left for Israel. Perhaps he noticed that I had matured in the interim. Although he obviously relished the physical ease and the adulation he received at Esalen, I sensed he was glad to have a visit from someone completely outside Esalen, someone who was not a needy therapee, not a competing therapist, someone who obviously enjoyed his company but was otherwise "doing his own thing."

Once in a while I considered writing a short memoir about those times with Fritz Perls. I wrote a piece about Zen and Gestalt therapy (Joslyn, 1975), a longer version of which appeared in a German journal (Joslyn, 1977), but Fritz was not the focus. Writing about someone else is also writing about oneself. I was not a member of Fritz' family. I was not an old friend. I was not a longtime colleague of his. I was not even a person with a classic case of a particular disorder whom Fritz might mention later by way of illustration. Nor was I a journalist gathering facts and fancies from others about Fritz for a synopsis of his life. Whatever the gist of my acquaintance with Fritz, it moved me in the direction of Zen Buddhism after he left for Israel to paint pictures. So, here, for a few pages, I would like to reminisce about shared events with a remarkable individual whose words I can only paraphrase. And in so doing, perhaps I can convey how those events opened my heart and mind toward Zen.

How It Began

MY LIFE would have taken a completely different turn had I not glimpsed a subversive title lurking among rows of very dull psychology textbooks. I blinked to be sure I hadn't misread it. No, there it was, loud and clear, *Gestalt Therapy* (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951). The grad school professor for whom I waited was still out of his room so I opened the book, scanned a few pages eagerly, then noted the authors and the publisher. "Gestalt" was suspect enough. Adding "Therapy" to it made for a really out-of-place title among the textbooks about learning theory and watered-down behaviorism which prevailed at most psych

departments in the 1950s and '60s. When the professor returned I asked about the book and, predictably, he apologized for its presence as though it had sneaked into his office by accident.

After buying the book, I found that it more than lived up to its promising title. Previously, as an undergraduate, I had read everything I could find on Gestalt psychology because of its phenomenological approach, its aesthetic appeal, and other reasons. (Wertheimer, the founder of Gestalt psychology, by the way, was an accomplished pianist, on the verge of becoming a professional musician before he settled into psychology as a profession.) Prior to getting acquainted with Gestalt, I had read whatever I could find by Freud, Jung, Adler, Rank, and others associated with the psychoanalytic movement. I was delighted to discover then that *Gestalt Therapy* was not only an amalgam of Gestalt and psychoanalysis, it offered entirely new perspectives as well.

In a burst of enthusiasm, I wrote a letter to the authors, care of the publisher. Two or three weeks later an answer arrived from Paul Goodman. He thanked me for my praise of the book, and referred me to Fritz Perls who was offering both individual and group sessions in West Los Angeles. Sensing the phenomenological thrust of my letter, Paul Goodman also referred me to works of Erwin W. Straus (1963, 1966) for which he obviously had much admiration. (I should note in passing that I have never heard or seen a reference to Straus' work by any other Gestalt therapist, yet, with no apparent awareness of Zen literature, Straus cleared away most of the conceptual biases in our present scientific worldview that can obscure Zen.) I felt considerable gratitude toward Goodman for mentioning Straus, and, as the work of Straus became increasingly familiar to me, it no doubt influenced how I interpreted what occurred with Fritz Perls in psychotherapy.

Meeting Perls

A PHONE CALL got me an appointment with Perls. It was a long drive but I had no trouble finding his address. Twenty-five years previously I had attended high school just a few blocks from his apartment building. Indeed, arriving there felt like returning to an important but unfinished

part of my life. I found the door of the apartment, knocked and waited, wondering how Perls might look. When he opened the door, I met a twinkly-eyed, balding, moustached, middle-aged gentleman, with a bow tie, and a cigarette in a holder with which he gestured in a refined European manner. He greeted me with a pronounced German accent, and, although he curtly waved me in, I sensed immediate rapport. (In the antihair era of the 1940s and '50s, beards and long hair were rather rare in Europe and America. I had been wearing a beard for eleven years, and though Perls teased me once about being rather young for it, I sensed that he quietly approved of the beard and its association with a bohemian life style.)

In those pre-Esalen days, Perls was still doing some individual therapy. After several individual sessions I joined one of his groups to save money, and then, because I wanted as much experience as possible, I joined another of his groups. Looking back now, I feel grateful I was able to begin with individual sessions because I got a better sense of Perls as a person, and with that perspective I could subsequently appreciate how his style in group therapy was evolving. (Please note that referring to Fritz Perls as "Perls" during the period in West Los Angeles, and as "Fritz" during the period in Big Sur and overall as "Fritz Perls" is deliberate.)

Individual Sessions

THE FIRST thing that struck me about Perls' style was the *SILENCE*. This stemmed of course from the psychoanalytic method in which Perls was initially trained. It's one thing however to lie on a sofa and free-associate with a psychoanalyst sitting quietly behind you taking notes; it's another thing altogether to face your therapist in silence. Later, when I became a therapist myself, I began to appreciate the disciplined patience needed to maintain an effective silence in therapy. I've heard it said that Perls was just an egoistic "showman" who liked to perform in group therapy sessions. Such statements, if they are not just hearsay, seem to be made by people who only attended group sessions at Esalen or later. Unquestionably Perls enjoyed the *APPARENT MAGIC* of evoking personal change in psychotherapy, but I don't see

that enjoying one's work is a shortcoming. And, I doubt that anyone who experienced the silent intensity prior to the incisive intervention of Perls in individual sessions would imagine that "showman" could adequately describe his effective style.

Having read his book, I knew that Perls regarded *HERE AND NOW AWARENESS* as the heart of psychotherapy, and that inability to be fully present here and now signified unfinished business from the past. Initially it was difficult to attend effectively to immediate feelings, sensations and thoughts, especially since I came to Perls with previous therapeutic experiences in which past events per se were given much emphasis. I remember admiring Perls' insistence on the present tense of verbs when doing dreamwork, but I thought it was only a device like "role-playing" until I experienced a breakthrough one evening.

After years of Zen practice, I now see that attending to the present is much deeper than it appears, even to experienced Gestalt therapists. Continued awareness of the present can ease the habitual tyranny of pigeonholing events after the fact in terms of linear causality. It can open one to *QUALITY* or the unique, *IMMEDIATE EXPERIENCE* of each moment, preceding comparative or quantitative thinking, preceding abstract distancing. When both past and future are experienced as now, there is nothing before and after to hem the present in, hence the present per se as a constricted time interval vanishes. Whether he coined it or just quoted someone else, the "Lose your mind and come to your senses" slogan which Perls emphasized later on, is an inevitable development of present awareness. "Senses" in this case expresses one's immediate experience before there is any separating from it with comparisons or good/bad evaluations. "Mind" in this case expresses the usual after-the-fact thinking and feeling associated with unfinished business of the past. (This is not Zen, but it points to Zen.)

In one very painful session, I told Perls I couldn't "make up my mind" or "decide" what to do in a particular situation. He intruded abruptly by asking rhetorically "What is this 'mind' you are going to make up? Is it a bunch of pieces to be put together?" I couldn't answer. Then: "Do you know what 'decide' means?" Answering

himself, he gave me the etymology: "*Decide* comes from the Latin *decidere*, to cut off, or cut down. Now what are you going to cut off?" And then, anticipating my inability to answer, he went on to ask "Isn't it really a matter of what you *PREFER*, rather than what you have to cut off?" He followed through with the image of a primitive hunter at a waterhole, waiting patiently for a particular animal to emerge from the forest into the clearing. He chided me for a tendency to respond prematurely as though shooting at an animal before I could actually identify it. And with that I began to appreciate the importance of trusting preferences in everyday activities, and, in crucial, doubtful situations, of quietly attending until something appropriate seems to emerge spontaneously.

Please note here that "preference" is equally objective and subjective in origin. It comes from Latin *prae* (before) + *ferre* (carry, bear, put), therefore means to bear or put before, to tend or point toward, to imply, to relate to actually or latently, to embrace or include, to advance or promote. There is nothing in the origin of the word restricting it to subjective use only. A rainy day, for instance, can be said to prefer the accompaniment of dark clouds. An arrow shot in the air prefers (or is preferred in) taking an arc-like trajectory before landing. Preference in this comprehensive sense is an innate aspect of quality. It is experienced before being separated by comparisons or temporal series, although it is often reduced to these, after the fact.

Nathan Ackerman came out from New York with what was very innovative in those days: family therapy. He gave a lecture on the subject at a downtown Los Angeles hotel. Illustrating the lecture was a film of therapy sessions with a father, a mother and two sons. It was a masterful demonstration of a general systems view, of psychological problems as interrelational or *TRANSPERSONAL PHENOMENA* rather than as disorders specific to individuals only. Some well known L.A. area psychiatrists and clinical psychologists attending the lecture began criticizing the presentation during the coffee break, not acknowledging any validity to Ackerman's approach (see Ackerman, 1958). That scene of highly touted psychotherapists nit-picking Ackerman's work, like envious, small-minded competitors, felt like the last straw on top of

several weeks of frustrating events at grad school. To be reminded in what seemed like a cheap soap opera that so-called "humanistic psychotherapy" was not free of the mechanistic assumptions (misapplied from physics) which prevailed in academic psychology, that so-called professional "objectivity" was not free of the egoism and commercial greed of show business, put me in a real funk.

After the lecture I drove to Perls' place for an individual session. There I started to pace up and down in his room, fuming about what I'd witnessed at the Ackerman lecture, and about events at graduate school. Perls listened for a short while, then went to sleep, or appeared to sleep. I stopped, touched his shoulder. "Dr. Perls?" He popped one eye open, said "When you stop ranting I will wake up" and closed his eye again. I stopped. Perls slowly opened both eyes like a sleepy old frog. But soon I was off again on the same topic. This time he cut into my monologue with a sharp gesture and sharp voice: "Marc! Who are you talking to?" I stopped, and protested. "I'm talking to you, of course." "No!" he shouted. Then more gently "Do you think that after years of professional experience I don't know what egoists, nincompoops, bureaucrats, charlatans there are in psychiatry and psychology? Do you think I am blind and deaf and feelingless? Now, who are you really talking to?"

That stopped me again and, for five minutes or so, I was able to talk to Perls rather than spout at the ceiling and walls with Perls as a witness. But gradually the feelings welled up and I was on the verge of monologuing again when he nipped it in the bud. He raised his hand and very quietly, very gently, asked me about a woman I once had loved very much. "What would she do if you carried on like this?" "Mmm, I guess she'd walk out to the kitchen and make something to eat, maybe a good soup." "Well," Perls said, "if that didn't stop you, what then?" "Mmm. I guess she would start pulling up her blouse. And, as soon as I saw her beautiful breasts I'd probably forget everything else."

"All right" said Perls. "I am not a good maker of soups and I don't have beautiful breasts, so at this moment, what do you want from me, Fritz Perls?" That abrupt summary brought me back to awareness of the room and the reality of another human being, a genuinely caring human being, who was, however, not God. It was as though previously I had been ranting at an undefined deity

somehow responsible for everything wrong or unfair in life. Perls then referred to an earlier session in which I mentioned quitting work toward what might have been an operatic career because I couldn't stomach the self-touting egoism of many opera singers and their mean-spirited criticism of other singers. He asked me why I expected psychoanalysts and others who had criticized Ackerman's family therapy to be different from opera singers. I replied that people who profess to teach, guide, or function as counselors and therapists, should be free of things like mean-spirited criticism.

"Where did you get this Pollyanna notion? Look at it: Human nature is human nature!" Perls replied with what sounded like "cold-hard-facts-of-life" cynicism. I mulled this over for several minutes in silence, reviewing the "oughtness" or "shouldness" of my expectations, the grief and anger that arose when the actions of important people belied expectations arising from their words, their titles, or their positions. It was not that I had to abandon a sense of the goodness of human nature, but rather that I had to accept the petty, selfish, mean, and even evil aspects of human nature which accompany the goodness. I had to accept the ridiculousness and stupidity of taking any side of a conceptual polarity as the sole value or truth. Light/dark, up/down, good/bad, you name it, there must be an underlying unity to each polarity or else the apparently conflicting entities would be in two, totally separate worlds. Then, out of nowhere, it seemed, a laugh arose. I began to laugh at myself and at human nature in general which does not appreciate its own, basic two-sidedness but tries to gain a certainty and predictability by fixing on one side of a polarity and devaluating, hiding or denying the other side.

I realized later that the laughter could just as well have gone to tears. Either way, Perls would have affirmed the genuineness of my response, because he too had had a deep sense of the sadness of human existence. From World War I on, Perls underwent a series of faith-in-goodness-shattering experiences. His sorrow, however, did not become chronic self-pity. He could be impatient with time-wasting indulgence in self-pity by his patients, almost brutally impatient at times. He did not become bitter and almost cynically fatalistic, like Sigmund Freud. No one who is stuck in chronic cynicism can wholeheartedly espouse Gestalt

therapy. Life is not a Boy Scout arrangement with an exact balance of merits and demerits for one's good and bad behavior. There is anger and then there is grief in giving up a Boy Scout sort of worldview but this does not mean concluding that life is meaningless, purposeless and chaotic. A basic tenet of Gestalt therapy is that *natura sanat non medicus*, *NATURE CURES, not the doctor*, but this could not be so unless mind and body are more or less *SELF-REGULATING* (see Paul Goodman, 1977).

One of the most useful features of Gestalt therapy is its metaphor for any need or interest (hunger, thirst, sexual desire, and so on) as a figural arc proceeding from arousal to fulfillment, like the arcing phrase line of a melody. There are stages in the natural unfolding of this arc on its way from appearance to disappearance. And each stage can become "problematic," a point clung to in an attempt to prevent the unfolding of the next stage. Letting go of the last stage in the arc is particularly problematic and very likely represents the human tendency to deny death in all its actual or symbolic forms. (The work by Ernest Becker [1973] on the denial of death, provides an important link between Freud's rather forced notion of "death instinct" and the insights of Perls and Goodman about problems of letting an aspect of ego "die," when the arc of need or interest is completed.)

A simple illustration which emerged in dreamwork with Perls is the reaction I had after a very nice birthday party when I was six or seven years old. It was a late summer afternoon. The presents had been opened, the cake eaten, and everyone had gone home, and I felt very sad. I was clinging to the visual and auditory images of the gifts unwrapped, the cake uneaten, and my friends still present. Had I "died" to those things I could instead have enjoyed the feeling of a full stomach, and perhaps dozed off for a little siesta, then, on awakening, been "reborn" with a new interest.

A more detailed illustration of this feature of Gestalt therapy is a dream I had about losing a large piece of my hand with three fingers because of a fishing accident. In the dream I would put the piece of my hand in the kitchen freezer every night, take it out in the morning, and somehow attach it to my hand before leaving the house, pretending in the dream that my hand was still whole. Perls skillfully kept me from distancing

myself from the actual experience of the dream, and I had to agonizingly realize the loss of something important in my life. The next night I dreamed that instead of putting the (now grey and gangrenous) piece of hand in the freezer, I gave up and dumped it in the garbage bin. Two or three weeks went by. Then one night I dreamt that as I looked at my crescent-shaped, thumb and little finger hand, I discovered three, tiny green shoots sprouting up where the lost fingers used to be. I had taken on faith the ancient principle of *natura sanat* adopted by Gestalt therapy as the principle of self-regulation. In the changes of my life following this dream, I realized that *natura sanat* is not just a nice theory.

Group Sessions

THE MOST notable feature of group sessions was the initial *SILENCE* which had an effect that seemed more acute even than when it occurred in individual sessions. Typically, each person in the group wanted to get the attention of Perls and the group for this or that "problem." But the price of such attention was radical honesty. So we waited in silence, caught between wanting attention on the one hand, and anxiety on the other hand about possibly incurring group criticism for lack of honesty. Tension mounted considerably with the silence. For those who habitually relieved tension by fidgeting, the silence was especially discomfiting because they had to restrain movements like leg-jiggling or fingernail-biting in an effort to appear collected and calm. The heavy and almost loud silence was broken only when someone overcame the anxiety (of being scorned for phoniness) and gave in to the urge for sharing.

As soon as someone else spoke up, each of us probably felt both envy (e.g., "It's not fair that she is getting all this sympathy; my problem is much more pressing!") and relief (e.g., "Thank goodness the group is not getting on my case for beating around the bush like he's doing now"). Perls cultivated silence as the *GROUND* around which and in which all personal events and group reactions were *FIGURES* or gestalts. Usually he stared at the walls or the ceiling while quietly smoking a cigarette. He seemed to be totally unconcerned about what we were doing, or not doing, almost as if he were in another world. Subsequently, however, it became evident that not

directly, not frontally, but peripherally, so to speak, he was monitoring our actions and reactions before anyone spoke up.

I can appreciate now that we were getting *PHENOMENOLOGICAL TRAINING*. The silence fostered an uncluttering of secondary concerns, so that a primary concern came more into focus. *HONESTY* involved staying with one's immediate feelings, perceptions and thoughts as much as possible without interpreting, justifying or explaining away one's immediate experience in terms of past events or future expectations. An example of such honesty might be the matter of professional status in the group. Several of us were already licensed professional therapists, or working toward that end. There was an initial tendency then to let the group know that one was a "shrink" and not just a "patient." Perls encouraged the group to short-circuit all attempts toward establishing a professional "pecking order."

He had criticized me during an individual session for quoting a passage from *Gestalt Therapy* (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951). At first I thought maybe he was just antitheory; then I recalled hearing some scuttlebutt about him being envious and critical of Paul Goodman's contribution to the theoretical parts of *Gestalt Therapy*. Finally I realized his attitude was simply part of the basic here-and-now orientation of Gestalt therapy. On occasions outside a therapeutic session, Perls might welcome a theoretical discussion, such as the one we once had about Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1962). In a therapeutic session, however, we were all *JUST HUMAN BEINGS SHARING* wherever we were at, trusting that in the Gestalt process something of value to each of us would emerge. Trying to step outside the group by way of claiming to be a therapist rather than a therapee was a denial of the process, just as distancing from one's immediate feelings by abstractly quoting from a book was a denial.

Feeling as though one were in a "hot seat" when evoking the group's attention, became formalized later with the label *HOT SEAT* for a particular chair in the group. Again, from hearsay only, or from late-coming acquaintance with group sessions, some people have spoken of the hot seat and other chair assignments as though they were mechanical ploys unique to Perls' groups, and not really necessary to Gestalt therapy. Once while

conducting a workshop myself, I saw firsthand how any method could become routine and then be played out meaninglessly. A young man in the group was quite adept at mindlessly going back and forth between *TWO CHAIRS*, expressing this aspect of himself or his situation, then expressing that aspect. To break up the automation, I told him to take a third chair and describe the other two chairs getting alternately occupied by a jack-in-the-box character. From the humor in this view of his behavior, the young man was able to break through to something more genuine. The point is that therapeutic methods like the hot seat and two-chair dialogues, while useful, are not absolutely necessary to good therapy. Like other therapeutic methods, they evolved quite naturally within Perls' groups; they were not arbitrarily invented by Perls, nor were they used mechanically by Perls. I am certain that were he to notice any method becoming just a rote part of the therapeutic process, Perls would have modified it to evoke a spontaneous response.

Another memorable feature of group sessions was the question with which Perls challenged professionals or would-be professionals: "Why do you want to be a psychotherapist?" He had already put me through that gauntlet in individual sessions: "*THERAPIST! WHY?*" The usual, cliché answer is "I want to help other people." "Boolsheet!" he might reply. Of course one wants to help other people but making a career of it is another matter. When a career is involved, there are other reasons of which Perls wanted us to become aware. Most importantly, it seemed, he wanted to bring to light the peripheral assumption that we can solve our own problems by solving problems for other people. Do-gooders are all too likely to hold this assumption, thereby postponing dealing with their own problems which will then commingle with the problems of their patients or clients.

I had a dream about a toy dump truck rusting away in a sand pile. I mentioned the dream in passing on to another topic, but Perls insisted I back up and work on the dream by regarding it in a here-and-now manner. At a certain critical point in my narrative he told me to *BECOME THE OBJECT* in my dream. I resisted. Then, trusting Perls' direction, I gave over to imagining myself being the little red truck. Immediately there was a sense that I (as the truck) had been rusting away

on that sand pile for aeons, abandoned by a child in some long-gone, mythological past. From the sadness of being the toy truck in a dream, I recalled getting such a truck for Christmas when I was a child. I recalled asking my father to help me extricate the little truck from a Santa Claus stocking hanging from the fireplace mantel. Right away it became my favorite toy. I could play with it for hours in the backyard sandbox of my great-grandmother's house in Santa Monica, California. I can still appreciate its fire-engine red color, its metallic heaviness and angularity, its coolness if it had been in the shade for a while, or hotness if it had been in the sun. I recalled filling the truck with sand, then driving it (*brum, brum*) over to...

Suddenly this all-engrossing activity was broken by the sound of a woman weeping. I recalled how I stopped playing in the sand...listened...realized it was my mother. She was in the screened area at the back of the house. Naturally I hurried there to see what the matter was. Noticing me, she started to wipe away her tears, seeming to regret that I overheard her. "What's the matter, mommy?" She gave me a hug but denied anything was wrong. I didn't believe her. I had sensed for several weeks that something was amiss. I wanted to do something for my mother, wanted to feel I could make a difference, wanted to ensure in a vague childlike way that my mother (on whom I and my younger siblings depended) wouldn't break down. My father, who should have been taking this responsibility, wasn't home. (We were in the midst of the big depression and, in spite of his law degree, father was away trying to sell something or other door-to-door.)

Later I learned that my parents were on the brink of separating. I was only four years old but I feared the breakup might be my fault and I felt somehow responsible for my mother's well-being. While I was telling the group about these memories, an insightful woman in the group brought me back to the little red truck. (We were all learning a group process, helping as well as being helped.) I began choking up, seeing that although my mother later remarried happily, when I left the truck in the sand pile, I left it forever. It was equivalent to emotionally abandoning part of childhood and beginning to take the premature role of a "parental child." Perls prompted me to follow through with the old, unfinished business, and in doing so I realized

my desire to become a psychotherapist was strongly influenced by this childhood event. Several times after that, Perls prodded me into becoming aware of other unfinished business involved in my goal of becoming a psychotherapist.

On another occasion in the group, I worked on a dream about walking through a cemetery. Perls kept herding me, like a sheepdog caring for a wayward lamb. He asked me to report in detail what I was experiencing. I described the direction in which I was walking, the shapes of headstones, the names and dates on them, and so forth. While this was occurring, I experienced pain in my eyes that increased as I progressed down a particular row of graves. Then I was silent for a while. Perls asked me in what direction I was walking, and, when I told him, insisted that I return to the previous row. I resisted because the pain in my eyes suddenly came back. "Look!" Perls insisted. "Tell us what you see" (in the dream of course). The pain increased. "Don't avoid it. Look! Tell us what you see," he insisted. Overcoming considerable resistance, almost whispering, I reported that I saw the name of my little brother on the headstone, and a death date indicating he was four or five years old at the time of this dream death. And I saw with a jolt that I had wished for the death of my brother on some occasion.

"Okay, Mr. Nice Guy," said Perls sarcastically. I didn't hear him at first. My attention was absorbed in the fact that when I stated without hedging what I saw and accepted responsibility for the implied violence in what I saw, the pain in my eyes ceased. Then I heard Perls saying "Now you begin to recognize your not-so-nice side, Marc." That was probably the hardest moment in my therapy with Perls. I had to let go of an idealized feature in my self-image, but it started a freeing process that went on for several years afterward.

Therapeutic Insights

As I write this I am surprised to discover I remember much more than I thought possible. Now, instead of thinking I can easily cover the important features of my interaction with Perls in a few pages, I have become aware of more and more details of interest that must be left out to bring this essay to a close. And the choice of what and what not to include is becoming more and more arbitrary.

A fellow in one of Perls' groups complained about the anxiety that was sabotaging his creative work. Perls told him to quit talking about anxiety and to actually manifest the anxiety instead. In effect, Perls used "negative psychology" or *PRESCRIBING THE SYMPTOMS*, that is, assigning the very thing which the therapee wants to avoid. Some critics might claim that Perls borrowed this kind of therapeutic intervention from Viktor Frankl (1978), but it follows quite naturally from the dynamic principles of Gestalt therapy, as can be seen, for example, in the related prescription above of experimentally "becoming" any person or thing encountered in one's dreams. Prescribing symptoms subsequently became a fine art in the work of therapists associated with Milton Erickson, Gregory Bateson, and Don Jackson (see, e.g., Jay Haley, 1973, or Paul Watzlawick and his associates, 1974). Perls, however, was a master of prescribing the symptoms in his own way.

After carefully watching what had been described as "anxiety," Perls told the fellow to *CHANGE THE WORDING*; in place of "I am anxious or scared" to say experimentally "I am excited." The fellow protested, but what a difference in his behavior after he changed the label of his experience! He began to see that in imagining he was losing control he had been sabotaging the enthusiasm which accompanies the arising of new, creative ideas. On another occasion, a fellow spoke about suffering guilt. Guilt was prescribed and after watching what was supposedly guilty behavior, Perls asked him to experimentally change the wording and say "I am angry." Again, the change in behavior labeling had a noticeably clarifying effect.

Whenever anyone in the group really gave their best to the situation, nakedly exposing deep feelings, Perls could be quite protective. On occasion I've heard people say he was cruel but I would strongly object to that characterization. In the first place, Gestalt was emerging as an on-the-spot, short-term therapy which bypassed the years of free-associating on a couch and working out the dynamics of transference demanded by psychoanalytic therapy. If definite changes of attitude and behavior are to occur in a shorter period, a lot of time wasted on "amenities" has to be pruned out. Also, as mentioned previously, from his life-and-death experiences Perls had

little patience with the superficialities, self-justifications, and time-wasting games that people can play in psychotherapy.

Once, only once did I challenge his style. I thought he was abetting a kind of group gang-up on a young woman who was expressing some sentiments related to her Roman Catholic background. I called Perls a "frustrated rabbi" (meaning he was denying religious values because of an unacknowledged desire to be recognized as a religious leader). He took the comment quite well. And later he waived the apology I offered when I saw what he had seen: The woman was trying to con the group into accepting her masochistic attitude as an unchangeable part of her religious upbringing.

Perls had an unusual grasp of metaphors which express attitudes in physical terms. A man complained about weather conditions, room and body temperatures, as though they had nothing to do with his emotional state. Perls asked him about an upcoming job change (the change was feared) and then about his girlfriend (her pressing for marriage was repeatedly put off). Perls commented: "You've got a good case of cold feet, don't you!" A woman complained she was the object of unwanted sexual attention day and night, yet she dressed, did her makeup, walked, and talked as though she were inviting such attention. Perls asked her to stand up, then he walked over and gestured very gently as though he were going to push her. She fell back into her chair, arms and legs akimbo. Perls commented "You're a real pushover, aren't you!" *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim* (Perls, 1969b) contains a variety of such therapeutic exchanges.

Closing Comments

IF PERLS and Goodman were alive now, I wonder what they would say about the present state of psychotherapy in general and Gestalt therapy in particular. They respected comprehensive theory and effective techniques, but they were also leery of what might be called the "bureaucratizing" of their insights. To put it another way, they regarded themselves as artists and while there may be science in an art, art cannot be reduced to science, still less to scientism (where the metaphysics of science are assumed to be absolute). While Perls did not write novels like

Goodman, he painted pictures (some of which hung in his West Los Angeles apartment and were, to my eye, quite good). And during our first individual session he said if he had had any talent as a musician, he would not have gone into psychiatry. With that remark he was probably testing my resolve to continue in psychology despite the irrelevance then of most academic psychology to real life, but I had no doubt it was an echo of what he faced as a young man seeking an appropriate career.

What is the *APPROPRIATE* behavior in a particular time and place? That may be the final criterion of "mental health." And it may well be the final criterion in many other human evaluations. "Appropriate" is another name for the "just-so-ness," "suchness" or "fittingness," of relationships in and around an event. Appropriate(ness) expresses the unique, unrepeatable *QUALITY* of any event. Once appropriateness is manifested it can be regarded as *PREFERENCE* in the double-sided sense of that word mentioned previously. But appropriate to what, for what, and who is to say? Appropriateness depends on human evaluation, but human evaluation changes from time to time and place to place. How can we be certain about things if they're not reducible to timeless and fixed entities? How can we control nature and predict natural events if our means are not purged of the vagaries of human evaluation? That is more or less the attitude elaborated in the worldview we inherited from the so-called Age of Reason in Europe.

Descartes and others of that time assumed the only things people can agree on are numbers or quantitative relations, and formulations put in terms of numbers. Therefore, to be scientific, everything we see must be reduced to notions like size or speed of movement to which numbers can be attached. Otherwise, our experience must be dismissed as subjective and anthropocentric. In effect, any phenomenon must be reduced for the most part to visual representation (a denial of the relevance of all "lower" sensory, emotional and kinetic input to perception), must be repeatable (a denial of the uniqueness of every moment and a denial of the true nature of change), must have a specific boundary (not overlap in any way with other phenomena), must have a specific location (a denial of the dynamic, interactive quality of

all events), and must lend itself to being subdivided in such a way that its parts can be measured, or it is not "real."

What word can be used to effectively transcend the kind of reductionism we have inherited from the eighteenth century? There is no word, it seems, which will not subject us to possible derision for refusing to accept a worldview where "life" and "mind" are illusory phenomena reducible to abstractions derived from measurements of dead matter, that all of us (as life and mind) are isolated from our own bodies, from other human beings, and from nature, our implacable enemy. Hence "artist" is probably as good (or bad) as any other word to describe Perls and Goodman in their approach to life, to problems in human nature, and to Gestalt therapy.

Along with the musically gifted Max Wertheimer, founder of Gestalt psychology, to whom Perls dedicated his first book (1947/1966), Kurt Goldstein (1939, 1940/1963) with his organismic psychology also had a strong influence on Perls. And it is interesting to note that Goldstein regarded his work as continuing the tradition of Goethe, the great German poet and playwright whose extensive research in botany and several other fields of science (though sadly neglected by scientists in his time) is now emerging as a model of how scientific research can be done in a context which no longer tries to bypass or replace the human side of experience. Bortoft (1996), and several other physicists contributing to a volume by Seamon and Zajonc (1998) have elaborated on various perspectives of Goethe's original work and its potential for the future. (For an historical view of the various forms of holism derived from antiatomistic sentiment in German culture, some of which fostered the views of Goldstein and others of Perls' generation, see Harrington, 1996.)

Among contemporary physicists and other scientists who have taken a stance outside the "strait and narrow" orthodoxy of scientism (although they are not in the Goethian tradition), I might mention Bohm (1982), Bohm and Peat (1987), Bohm and Hiley (1993), Jones (1982, 1992), Nalimov (1981, 1982), and Toulmin (1990). Now, leading back from art to trust in appropriateness, here is a comment I made (Joslyn, 1975, p. 234) in a previous essay about Gestalt therapy. "Whenever a dispute...arises

between people and someone says finally, 'Well, who's to say?' the commonplace mystery of appropriateness is being evoked. Yes indeed, who is to say? And who is to systematize this profound sense of fittingness? But now and again someone like Perls tries." In the present essay I've mentioned silence, here-and-now awareness, quality (unique, irreducible experience), immediate (unmediated) experience, preference (as both objective and subjective), interrelational (transpersonal) phenomena, *natura sanat* (self-regulation), phenomenological training, radical honesty, and so forth. These were features in my personal encounter with Perls which point toward Zen. To offer a more general supplement, something should also be said about how Perls and his coauthors organized their concepts of appropriateness in the book *Gestalt Therapy*. Let's look at a summary of the book plan.

In a neurotic splitting, one part is kept in unawareness, or it is coldly recognized but alienated from concern, or both parts are carefully isolated from each other and made to seem irrelevant to each other, avoiding conflict and maintaining the status quo. But if in an urgent present situation, whether in the physician's office or in society, one concentrates awareness on the unaware part or on the "irrelevant" connections, then anxiety develops, the result of inhibiting the creative unification. The method of treatment is to come into closer and closer contact with the present crisis, until one identifies, *risking the leap into the unknown with the coming creative integration of the split*.

This book concentrates on and seeks to interpret a series of such basic neurotic dichotomies of theory leading up to a theory of the self and its creative action. We proceed from problems of primary perception and reality through considerations of human development and speech to problems of society, morals, and personality. Successively we draw attention to the following neurotic dichotomies, some of which are universally prevalent, some of which have been dissolved in the history of psychotherapy but are still otherwise assumed, and some of which (of course) are prejudices of psychotherapy itself. (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951, p. 240, emphases added)

Someone once told me that Goodman was more of a theorist than Perls, and that Goodman wrote most of this section of the book. Be that as it may, I assume all three authors shared more or less in

the views expressed, whoever did the actual writing. (Perls' previous book [1947/1966] is evidence enough of his ability to theorize in a very original manner.) What follows is a list of the main dichotomies discussed in the book plan.

"Body" and "Mind": this split is still popularly current, although among the best physicians the psychosomatic unity is taken for granted. We shall show that it is the exercise of a habitual and finally unaware deliberateness in the face of chronic emergency, especially the threat to organic functioning, that has made this crippling division inevitable and almost endemic, resulting in the joylessness and gracelessness of our culture...

"Self" and "External World": this division is an article of faith uniformly throughout modern western science. It goes along with the previous split, but perhaps with more emphasis on threats of a political and interpersonal nature. Unfortunately those who in the history of recent philosophy have shown the absurdity of this division have mostly themselves been infected with either a kind of mentalism or materialism...

"Emotional" (subjective) and "Real" (objective): this split is again a general scientific article of faith, unitarily involved with the preceding. It is a result of the avoidance of contact and involvement and the deliberate isolation of the sensoric and motoric functions from each other. (The recent history of statistical sociology is a study in these avoidances raised to a fine art.) We shall try to show that the real is intrinsically an involvement or "engagement." (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951, pp. 240-242)

Other dichotomies follow like *Infantile/Mature*, *Biological/Cultural*, *Poetry/Prose*, *Spontaneous/Deliberate*, *Personal/Social*, *Love/Aggression*, *Unconscious/Conscious*. But the first three almost synonymous dichotomies given above, are the most important. It took much courage for these authors to shake the prevailing clichés of academic psychology and psychotherapy in 1950. When the split of self versus external world is no longer accepted, when it becomes obvious that "reality" is not a given set of objective circumstances imposed on us from the outside but rather the outcome of a subject-object interaction, and when it becomes evident that many social and ecological ills are linked with the previous split, one is inevitably drawn to social criticism, whether or not this is openly stated. One might say that Goodman, as a born U.S. citizen, took

freedom of speech for granted and was therefore more vociferous as a social critic (see, e.g., Goodman, 1960, 1964) than Perls, who, as a survivor of World War I and then Naziism, might have been more cautious. But Perls was not lacking in courage and could be quite outspoken about whatever he experienced as shallow or phony. I think the difference is rather that Perls had less faith than Goodman in social processes on a larger scale, even in a democratic country.

The "*I do my thing and you do your thing*" slogan associated with Perls in his late period appears antisocial to some. I think it arose from a kind of "anarchistic" feeling, not uncommon in those who survived the worst of Fascism or Communism and either of the two world wars. Beyond close and well-tested relationships with a few others, such people had a healthy skepticism about the genuineness of large-scale human caring, honesty, and fairness. They might give all their belongings or even their lives for close friends in dire need. But toward shallow relationships with artificial closeness that even had a scent of Big Government propaganda or Big Business advertising, they felt unremitting suspicion. To them, "your thing" and "my thing" may overlap or even be the same, but this potential relationship must unfold of its own accord without external forcing; meanwhile it is better not to assume it.

When the split of self versus external world is no longer accepted as reality per se, it is not only the clichés of social reality that become exposed for what they are, the atomistic and mechanistic biases of "scientism" in general become evident as well. When we are *IN AND OF THIS WORLD*, no longer regarding ourselves as isolated minds reducible to brains, reducible to genes, reducible to subatomic particles, we may realize that nature is not just dead matter, not coldly indifferent or even hostile to us. We are free, for example, to view the "Big Bang" theory about the origin of the universe not as "gospel truth" but rather as an interpretative model (of some observed facts) which will eventually give way to another model (in the way of all past models). We are free to create a working philosophy about all aspects of existence as they relate to our everyday lives, from atoms to galaxies, and from amoebas to human beings. We do not have to suspend sensing and thinking or living in terms of what we sense

and think until some final word about "reality" is formulated by professional cosmologists. *THE* final model of existence will never be attained, but meanwhile life demands that it be meaningfully lived, here and now, all the time.

In theorizing about neurotic dichotomies, Perls and his coauthors avoided the extremes of "mentalism or materialism" which they warned against in the quotation above. And they went on to offer many insightful observations about human experience which could foster abiding interest in a meditative practice like Zen. Still, various aspects of *Gestalt Therapy* and other writings indicate that Perls and his coauthors were unable to completely break through the dualisms we have all inherited.

Take for instance the "sequence of fixations" (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951, pp. 460-461): *confluence, introjection, projection, retroflection, egotism*. Theoretically brilliant and therapeutically very useful though these concepts are, they still exhibit Freudian dualism. "Projection" denotes a throwing outside of that which belongs inside, and vice versa with "introjection." If (as Perls maintains elsewhere) there is no such thing as an organism separate from its environment, how can something be "thrown" from inside to outside, or vice versa? With no further explanation, inside and outside per se refer to the same old split of (self as) mind versus body, or (self as) body versus the environment. Fixation could more appropriately be termed "misallocation" *WITHIN* a subject-object continuity, thus projection is misallocation toward object, and introjection is misallocation toward subject.

From Zen experience one discovers that "ego" (or what is usually thought of as an intentional "I am") is not at all synonymous with the unity or continuity of subject-object. This unity is not a synthesis of subject and object; it precedes the distinction of subject and object. It could be called *Self* (with a capital S); it could also be called *Nature*, or *God*, but ultimately it is unnameable. It is the indivisible ground of all our experience, and yet it is "empty" or undefineable. Unless it is realized that ego is not Self, the term "confluence" is confusing; it should denote a lack of distinction between ego and non-ego, not a lack of absolute dualism within Self. "Egotism" (the opposite of confluence) denotes a fixation to a present "I"

holding out against a change to a future "I"; if the true nature of Self is understood, however, egotism is more economically regarded as ignorance of Self, or denial of Self, and therefore lack of trust about letting a present ego fixation vanish for new, emerging experience.

Much more, of course, could be written in appreciation of Gestalt therapy as a process of unlearning or uncluttering in preparation for Zen, even when it is later realized that Gestalt therapy is not synonymous with Zen. What I've written can hardly suffice, but must do. I would like to conclude, oddly enough, with a quote from historian Jacques Barzun which expresses for me the general sense of daring to live in terms of Gestalt psychology and Gestalt therapy, and the specific sense of knowing Fritz Perls:

I think I have shown how far modern man is from worshiping himself. He has given up even self-respect. If he is to climb out of his abyss, I repeat he must again philosophize. For to be a philosopher in the sense I mean is identical with being a man, and to be a man anthropos must be willing to be anthropomorphic. He can put what limitations he pleases on this indulgence, but he needs no technical authorization to feel fully himself...His imagination ranges everywhere and its conflicting intuitions impel him to discover and remake the universe, never finally, never satisfactorily, but always with exaltation of tragedy, and, when no Puritanism prevents, with the gaiety of comedy. In imagination man can infer from the present universe what it was millions of years before his advent; and he can also see that it did not exist in the full sense without him; without him it is colorless, soundless, absolutely unorganized by categories of thoughts and words: as the poet said: "Earth was not Earth before her sons appeared"...It is this indispensability of man for every purpose which makes his present self-cornering in our scientific culture at once pathetic and perverse. (Barzun, 1964, pp. 305-306)

"Philosophy" here is not an ivory tower substitute for real life. It is regaining the freedom to examine your world view, such as it may be, and to concede no aspect of it to the hearsay of parents, teachers, religious or political leaders, scientists, great books, or other authorities apart from your immediate experience. It is breaking

through the idolatry of reified words, rediscovering what Barfield (1976, 1985) called "*original participation*" and learning to take full responsibility for the allocation of meaning and the redefining of events in your life. Becoming a philosopher in this sense is not yet Zen either, but it seems to be a necessary prerequisite to Zen. One must take the scary, lonesome and apparently presumptuous risk of challenging the gods: "What? Me know better than the Gods? Yes, yes, yes! I can see they are half-blind. Not as blind as the materialists and the spiritualists [body or mind extremists], but they too have prejudices galore. Perhaps one day I will find the truth. Yes, pompous thought, the truth!" (Perls, 1969a, p. 3)

In so far as Gestalt therapy is rooted in everyday life, Zen realization is always a latent possibility. In so far as Gestalt therapy is a method or means unto itself, Zen is a million miles away. To put this in a Zen way, "When you meet a Gestalt therapist, or Gestalt therapist, eradicate him/her." (Once when I tried to corner my Zen Master with a Zen question, he looked up over his spectacles and said "Not now; now there is only old Japanese gentleman reading newspaper.") Unless a Gestalt therapist intends to become a therapist him/herself, the theories and methods of Gestalt can be reassimilated to everyday life. A Gestalt therapist ought to be free of the theories and methods of Gestalt even while practicing Gestalt. Carl Gustav Jung reportedly said in his old age "I am not a Jungian." Similarly, when confronted with some of the present-day disputes about what is or is not officially Gestalt, Fritz Perls, were he still alive might well say, "I am not a Gestaltist."

Zen might be described as the fulfillment of realizing the Self that from the very beginning has no need for therapy. Followers of great founders tend to ape, to take literally, and to fixate the initial insights of the founders. To appropriately honor Fritz Perls and the other founders of Gestalt therapy, we need to be free to rediscover everything they discovered afresh. That would be the Zen way. My encounter with Fritz Perls came at a crucial time. Without it I might not have found the courage to hold out in what for a long time seemed like turning the world and myself inside out. So, I want to close with this acknowledgment:

Maybe you fulfilled your quest before you died.
But if you failed it matters not; though
Forty years have passed you are still here.
So manifest your Buddha Nature now with me.

See!
Thank you
Fritz,
and
GASSHO!

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