



## Notes from Big Sur: the Evolution of Gestalt Conference at Esalen

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### Abstract

Our human capacity for productive relationships is at the core of much contemporary philosophical inquiry, research in neuropsychology, visionary politics and many forms of the healing arts. Gestalt has offered a holistic theory for understanding human process. It posits that we are relational, meaning-making beings. In the founding text for Gestalt Therapy, Paul Goodman strived to bridge the false dichotomies of mind and body, inner and outer experience, nature and nurture, thoughts and emotions (Perls, Hefferline, Goodman, 1951). But years before this Kurt Lewin developed a psychology that established the always interdependent field of person and environment, including other people, as the rightful focus for psychological inquiry (Lewin, 1936; Ullman, 2004). Gordon Wheeler introduced Lewin's contribution to Gestalt as a relational theory in 1991. In Gestalt Reconsidered he closes by asking if there is a connection between Gestalt's elegant theory of human process and a viable living ethics we can draw on in the contemporary world? The conference I tell about here was largely an experiential investigation of that question.

**Key Words:** Gestalt, relational being, intersubjectivity, evolution of psychotherapy

On November 13 to 18, 2005 eighty intrepid Gestaltists (and related others), gathered from around the world, at Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. They gathered to explore, experiment, and experience themselves, touched by this stunning stretch of Pacific coast. The underlying question was how might our freshly evolving, constructed understanding of our human life experiences offer a more empowered and deeply fulfilling story about who we are ... and im-

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portantly provide an ethical model for leading the world out of so many crises that surround us today. By coming together with attention to the fundamental intersubjectivity of our life experiences we might find new and ever more mindful ways to wonder about each other because, as Lynne Jacobs said on the opening morning of this five day session, "we are all more alike than not."

This was billed as a study conference on the evolution of Gestalt designed to celebrate Gestalt at Esalen over the 40 years since Fritz Perls was in residence. Some attendees brought amusing and touching stories of their personal work done with Fritz on site during the 1960's. Those stories and the sense of shared history they imparted contributed to building a complex human community. An evening meeting of the full community at mid-week featured a presentation by long-time Esalen resident, Eric Erickson, on the late Dick Price, cofounder with Michael Murphy of Esalen Institute and Gestalt heir-in-residence to Fritz Perls. Price's own work was called Gestalt practice, not therapy, and he integrated qualities of Buddhist practice, other Eastern teachings, and the wisdom of Native peoples into his workshops. His widow, Christine Price, carries on work out of this tradition at Esalen today. She wove a few of her stories deeply into the fabric of our week in smaller group settings.

It was clear from the conference materials and from the plenary panel topics that this conference was about more than shared history. It was an experiment in how to develop learning communities, in cultivating life supports and developing visionary skills that include greater empathy for one another. This was a chance to explore ways of living that embrace embodied self-care, meditative and reflective inquiry, interdependent identity in praxis, and interventions for change in a complex world. This was an inspiring endeavor, undertaken with much gusto by the conference conveners, Gordon Wheeler and several other members of the planning committee. The event was entered into with apparent trust, curiosity and excitement by everyone who came. The shared experiences that emerged, while wildly varied, seemed to encourage further adventures in meeting across our differences.

After welcoming introductions that followed a delicious dinner on the opening night, we moved around the room to discover some of the different ways we identify ourselves. Because people had arrived from such great distances as Melbourne and Moscow, from Sicily, Northern Italy, and Southern Mexico, from England, Portugal and many points across the U.S., we broke up early. Many chose to soak their travel-wearied bodies in the mineral hot baths overlook-

ing the Pacific Ocean. The ocean was, itself, bathed in the nearly full moonlight.

The next morning was sunny and warmed quickly into a cozy 60 something degrees F. The first morning's panel hit the ground running, addressing Intersubjectivity and Process. This panel introduced the premise that all our experience is a coemergent phenomenon of intersecting subjectivities. Frank Staemmler demonstrated what this means as he described the work of Gestalt therapy that moves from the confessional to an improvisational dance. He was the first of several to introduce the discovery of "mirror neurons" and how neuropsychology reflects that we are wired for confluence, wired for what he calls "a dyadically expanded state of consciousness". He defended confluence (once known in the Gestalt literature as a resistance to contact), emphasizing that empathy must be a two-way street when we speak of intersubjectivity.

Margherita Spagnuolo-Lobb, up next, further extended the importance of intersubjective thinking at the core of evolutionary Gestalt, by describing research that shows children imitating not only the behaviors of influential adults, but importantly, their intentions as well. She focused in on the element of timing in therapy, the ever-unfolding "now" that must be developed in order for clients to experience an alternative to their devitalized and repetitive relational patterns of behavior. Psychotherapy and cultural life in general deal with aesthetic values and the co-creation of spontaneous relational dances, Margherita suggested.

This was all pretty heady material for all of us and especially many "old school" Gestaltists in attendance who later indicated they had come expecting less of a thought-provoking experience and more of an emotional one. But Lynne Jacobs reeled us in describing the essential moral vision that is Gestalt. She expanded by saying that Gestalt therapy worked initially in part because the founding folks, who were cultural outsiders, really cared. "We are all speaking from our cares" and "we are wired to resonate and respond to the fields we are part of in order to learn". "Our emotions express what matters to us. In light of all this, I must ask myself what kind of human being do I want to be? What kind of human community do I want to create?"

These questions continued to resonate across the campus throughout the afternoon and the week. Several smaller, simultaneous afternoon workshops were offered covering Gestalt research, the secret language of intimacy (by Voice of Shame and Values of Connection author Bob Lee), self-portraits for developing aware-

ness, and the evolution of mother-daughter relationships. The whole group reconvened in the evening to examine how we were going to build our learning community for the week. Mark Fairfield and Gordon Wheeler asked—What voices are empowered here and which may be less so? How do we support felt experiences of belonging? We wondered these things together. The group experimented with sitting in large circle (in the dance dome), sitting mostly on the floor, many felt concerned about the limited opportunities to be heard. Finally it was decided to innovate small process groups to meet in the evenings before the plenary programs to allow more interaction and more expression of differences among us. This decision unfolded within the larger living community and supported the needs and interests of many members. Issues of the distribution of power continued to be explored along with other larger world issues, throughout the week in workshops, plenary sessions, over lunch and dinner, in strolls across the beautiful Esalen gardens overlooking the sea, and, of course, in the world famous luxurious hot tubs.

By Tuesday the outdoor temperatures were headed for the 70's F, the sun was still shining. Jim Kepner reminded us in the morning plenary on Energy and Embodiment that our embodied sensing capacity may be greater than our inherited models of therapy allow. If we can develop support for integrating awareness of our own embodiment as a tool of exploration and relational understanding, we can sharpen our sense of energetic dynamics with our clients and of the boundaries of the particular interpersonal fields we move through. Michael Clemmens spoke of the giants whose shoulders we stand on, mentioning specifically his teacher, Laura Perls, long-time estranged wife of Fritz Perls, and prolific trainer of psychotherapists during the 1950's, 60's, and 70's. Together Michael and Jim led the group deftly through some experiences to heighten awareness of the field as a source of healing energy, suggesting ways we can learn to tap into it.

The afternoon included demonstrations of intersubjective therapy; a group met with Leanne O'Shea to explore accessing erotic aspects of the field with awareness. Simultaneously, this presenter offered a different way to understand and find healthy supports for alleviating stress in today's fast-paced world. This model for stress reduction is firmly footed in contemporary Gestalt's shame and belonging model, on understanding that our most urgent solutions to stress are often the self-destructive habits we do not like in our repertoire of behavior. The now strong neurobiological evidence that

stress contributes to many sorts of disease provides new impetus for attending to this. The interdependent field-based model of human behavior of contemporary Gestalt stresses that when we want to make a change, we need to build in more supports. This can help us cultivate more sustainable solutions to stress as a lifelong practice. Another workshop provided further opportunities to encounter intersubjective theory and practice.

By evening of this second day, many were ready for a playful gathering. Gordon Wheeler and Peter Mortola provided this by introducing some experiential play around our life stories. Telling our stories is how we make meaning out of our experiences. We cannot *not* make stories. Gordon ended the evening with two bedtime stories, one about our hyper-individualized, separate selves, the other about our felt inter-relationships with the rest of our world.

Wednesday morning took off with Bert Moore, Dean of the School of Development at the University of Texas, summarizing some up-to-the minute brain research that supported his title for the talk: "All Affect All the Time". We can now measure how our brains respond to our connections with others. He described the neurocircuitry of links between our metaphoric hearts and minds, our feelings and our thoughts. He referenced some telling research with school kids who give twice as much small change after happy thoughts are induced (and take twice as much self-reward); kids who have been saddened give less but still take more than kids in the control group. He stressed that as infants there is good evidence that we are all the time downloading emotional information about the world around us empathically.

Bert was followed by Michael J. Mahoney, professor of psychology at Salve Regina University, a leading psychologist of the cognitive revolution, and a prominent figure in sports medicine. Michael introduced the role of contrasting polarities in perception and in knowing, and therefore in the very act of attending to our human experiences. He defined attention as "knowing what to hold on to, what to let go of, and knowing what to do when". He offered an abbreviated history of the cognitive revolution leading us right up to the Stage Three we are now in, characterized as Constructivism. The attributes of this evolutionary phase are: meaning-making is more important than previously (when pre-packaged information was the gold standard); relational complexities are acknowledged; most knowing is tacit knowing and emotional (our limbic systems allow us to face ourselves inwardly and outwardly simultaneously, like a Janus-faced god); intentionality matters as much as feedback from previous ex-

periences; and the dynamics of systems are always at play, meaning there are coalitional controls, rather than hierarchical ones, evolving today.

Michael identified other non-linear geneologies that are constructivist by nature such as Buddhism, Taoism, the pre-Socratics, Vicco, Kant, James, Wertheimer, Bergson, Frankl, Kuhn, Bruner, Bateson and others. He finished by describing some research on meditative states conducted at UC at Berkeley which documented what was previously considered as impossible attentional skills practiced by a monk and friend of H.H. the Dalai Lama.

Gordon Wheeler finished off the rich morning buffet of offerings with a presentation on how we humans got to be the way we are. This was a summary of research on apes and the evolutionary effects of social complexity on human brain architecture, on how our brains tripled in size in only the last one to two million years. Chimpanzees can manage social organizations of only up to 40 other chimps. Humans managed to develop language and syntax over the last 250,000 years (a relatively short time in evolutionary theory). This is explained by the fact that our brains are reorganizing ongoingly to cope with rapidly increasing social demands. Our band of "apes" now includes around 8 billion people. Gordon affirmed with his colleagues that we are wired for relationships.

Afternoon workshops demonstrated how we work with all this complexity in different ways. One presenter focused in on coaching and cultural leadership; another, Iris Fodor, a graduate psychology professor at NYU, presented from her new passion, digital storytelling with children in India and Peru, using visual narratives to give voice to cultural experience. There was a demonstration workshop on working with body process and in another small group workshop, retrieving access to support was explored.

Thursday morning's plenary started by reviewing where we had been together so far in this learning community. The morning was designed to offer experiences of "the unavoidable impact of our interdependency", as expressed by panel chair Mark Fairfield. We went about investigating the promise of our learning communities to increase participation and expand leadership potential, an urgently felt challenge in the larger world. Bob Lee followed with a summary of some shared Gestalt values and the question of whether these imply a Gestalt ethics. He generated a list of similarities and differences between the assumptions of the individualistic model of human experience and therapy and the relational perspective being advanced this week. An experiment followed, conducted by Cathe

Carlson, which involved breaking into first small groups to discuss our expectations and longings for this week at Esalen. I was fortunate to be grouped with Natasha Kedrova and Daniel Khlomov, who had traveled here from Russia. They shared some of what a week at Esalen meant for them, coming from across the world; some curiosities they had about access to the mountains that towered to our west; questions regarding theory and practice here versus how they teach at their Moscow Center. We all then moved into slightly larger discussion groups, sharing some touching and moving moments here, as we organized around selecting discussants for a fish bowl conversation in the whole group which followed. After one group member opened the discussion by suggesting a moment of silence, various members described their longings and expectations. The learning experiment was cut short by insufficient time to review the teaching points, heightening all our awareness of the trade-offs we experience in our busy lives. The twin experiences of connection and loss were described by several in the group. The unfinished gestalt, the interrupted task, continued working its way into conversations across the campus throughout the day.

This afternoon of the last full day offered four more workshop presentations: one from my friends of the Russian Gestalt Institute on personality, the founder of the Existential Therapy Studies Circle in Mexico City, Yaqui Andres, explored different dimensions of the therapeutic relationship; a workshop was also offered by Israeli author Talia Levine Bar-Yosef, whose new book *the Bridge: Dialogues Across Cultures*, was just published in time for the conference. A workshop on Gestalt and spiritual experience became quite moving and experiential when the large group went outside to watch their last glorious sunset of the week, over the Pacific Ocean. All of these offerings led up to the final evening gathering at the dance dome. We gave thanks and celebration with our bodies, dancing our dreams and our embodied community, all led with a special flare by Ellen Watson, dressed in green sequines. This dancing continued for over two hours of world beat, and the best of popular music from the last four decades, a little bit of jazz, all played while we scarved our bodies brightly or stripped partially, finally blessing one another with awareness, then rolling on the floor and landing in quite a heap of sweaty Gestalt bodies!

The following morning Malcolm Parlett reconvened us for our last gathering of this profound and playful event. Fiona Coffey, an organizational consultant, who consults to prisons, the British Home Office, and to large blue chip private sector organizations, spoke of

how Laura Perls considered her individual therapy work a political act.

The honored guest of the conference, Philip Lichtenberg, spoke on the subject of citizenship and awareness, addressing how awareness gets closed down in polarizing political situations. He invited some of us to reflect on dealing with the politics of our own families around the upcoming US holiday gatherings for Thanksgiving. How do we lean into the differences we feel when someone in a social get-together puts someone else down with a dismissive or bigoted remark? Do we let it pass? Do we challenge the other in a way that will shame that person into holding that prejudice more rigidly? Or might we learn to be curious about that other person's experience, meet him or her while establishing our different viewpoint, explaining that we haven't had the same experience of whatever group is being dismissed. He was heartily applauded for his presentation after naming our urgent responsibilities to converse politically, be socially active, and maintain awareness of our own impacts on the world around us.

Malcolm Parlett shared his sense of urgency for us all to heighten our awareness of our common ground, build on our alliances, remember the embodied presence and excitement we can bring to the bigger world field. "The world is ruled by institutions that depend for their power on our forgetfulness. Waking up is a revolutionary act" Malcolm reminded us, quoting David Korten (1999). He closed by pointing out that we can find innovative ways to do meaningful work. If necessary for promoting ourselves, we might represent our tradition in a variety of other ways – in effect 'multi-branding', so that some (for instance) might find it advantageous to introduce what they do as phenomenological, dialogic, and experimental therapy, or "PDE therapy", not as a replacement for Gestalt but simply as another way of describing it.

Malcolm then opened the floor to members of the community who built on the directions suggested by the three panelists, while passing around the mike. Giuliana Ratti addressed how we must not be dominated by the "narcissism of small differences" in our Gestalt communities. She also described sitting down at a café for "green shirts", the radically conservative movement in Italy, and being jokingly offered green coffee. She differentiated herself warmly, explaining that she would have her coffee in the familiar way, not green. Then she showed up the next day: an example, possibly, of building bridges. Giuliana also acknowledged a distinct pleasure in branding herself a Gestalt therapist. Others contributed quite a lot at this



point, Frank Rubinfeld offered some fresh discoveries; someone discussed starting to do some writing, one person brought Thomas Jefferson into the room, boldly differentiating himself from anti-war views that had been offered repeatedly throughout the week, someone else spoke of our connections to the humanistic psychology movement, another how we have been offering coaching all along. Kenny Hallstone offered one last rousing 'sermon-from-the-heart' on how much this way of being together could mean in the larger world. Many others spoke, Sara Garcia from her background as a college professor of literature, Enrique Mercadillo offered to help spread the word on the website Jim Kepner was setting up ... all voices supporting the sense of living kindness generated by the panelists and the convener, Gordon Wheeler, and then, the entire group. Many celebrated a felt sense of expansive connection in the room ... what someone called "quite a buzz".

After lunch the dynamic learning community we created went our separate ways, perhaps carrying some of the resonant empathy and curiosity we valued together so highly back into our various communities around the world. This week may have been a successful experiment in what Gordon once sought (in print) as an integration between (Gestalt's) "valid descriptive model of human process and a humane way of life". It was another stupendously beautiful day for gazing off into the sea, smelling the blooming flowers at Esalen, and being alive on this small interdependent and struggling planet we love.

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