

Winter Break

After a successful year the NWRPA is having a well earned rest.

There will be no Friday Seminar in December 2013. We will return on the second Friday evening of each month from the 10th of January 2014.

We are currently arranging seminars for next year. These will be as interesting and engaging as those for 2013. Our programme for the early 2014 will include:

Jim Davis on *Working with Couples*

Frank Denning with *Transference Focused Psychotherapy*

Paula Gillespie-Fotheringham on *Self-care: A Creative Approach*



Peter Philippson

Self in Relation: on being a Gestalt Psychotherapist

Friday, 8 November 2013

Thank you Peter for this warmly received presentation. Peter Philippson, M.Sc. (Gestalt Psychotherapy) is a UKCP Registered psychotherapist and trainer, a Teaching and Supervising Member of the Gestalt Psychotherapy & Training Institute UK, and a founder member of the Manchester Gestalt Centre. He is the author of *Self in Relation*, Gestalt Journal Press, and *The Emergent Self* Karnac/UKCP and *Gestalt Therapy: Roots and Branches* Karnac. You can look for his work on Kindle.

Gestalt is a German word with no English equivalent. It involves thinking in terms of wholes, of patterns, of how bits fit together. So for example a car constructed from parts is a gestalt but a collection of car parts is not. Gestalt does not have any mystical connotations in German.

Fritz Perls, was a noted German-born psychiatrist and psychotherapist. He was influenced by existentialism and psychoanalysis. He is connected to Sartre and was an analysand of Wilhelm Reich when Reich was a Freudian. Later in California he was influenced by Japanese philosophy and Zen. For Perls *self* is the companion word to *other*. Existence is an intentional act and more basic than anything you can say about an existence. That we have a consistent self is an achievement not a given. There is no innocent self. The self is always penetrated by the world.

We need flexibility. This flexibility means our self is a new creation for the moment that is authentic. Children are good at this adjustment. If we have too rigid a self we may feel safe. However it will not work for us if our life changes and we cannot change in creative way. The way we put our self into the world no longer fits.

One theme I took from Peter's talk, and the enthusiastic response, was that Gestalt Therapy has psychoanalytic roots that are familiar to me as a psychodynamic counsellor. However the way analytic thinking is threaded into the other roots of Gestalt Therapy gives an unfamiliar way of thinking about therapeutic work. For me the most different view is that self and other are co-created and this is true of the therapeutic relationship. So there is no possibility of therapeutic neutrality. The therapist sees the client as they actualise with that therapist and vice versa. The task of therapist is to join in that joint exploration of that fixed point of actualisation and experimentation around that fixed point. This is not about living the best way but of loosening the boundaries and finding different ways to be in the world.

As a kind of mental footnote can I add that I found starting this summary quite difficult. I then realised I was trying to write it as an objective summary of Peter's talk. However this may be just as impossible as therapeutic neutrality. (NB if you want to meet an advocate of therapeutic neutrality come and hear Frank Denning's seminar next year.) I also presume, from this point of view, that all of us present created fairly coherent senses of themselves in the world of this seminar. To misquote *Stingray* anything can happen in the therapy room. Peter did say that this has led to some abuses in Gestalt Therapies lifetime. Hence the value of keeping to boundaries including those related to no sex. Like a playground, once the boundaries are established anything else can happen.

Peter told an old story which was a helpful parable. A man approached a city new to him and asks a wise man what the people are like there. He adds that the people of his home city were mean and unfriendly.

A second man does the same thing but says the people he had left were friendly and welcoming. In both cases the wise man replied they would find the people of this new city similar to the people of the old city. Peter noted that there are self-fulfilling depressive beliefs. This is a turning away from sensory involvement with the world. A metaphor here is the horror film where the protagonists lock themselves in a house and then find the monster is also there.

There is an attention to the sensory in Gestalt. Peter had a Gestalt perspective on cognitive behavioural therapy. He said you could not cognitively change deeply held cognitive structures. You need to encourage people to try something different, which involves sensory experience. He gave as an example the dynamics of anxiety and the magical solutions of obsessive compulsive disorder, the illusion of doing something. If you remain outside the sensory and ask a question of a client you will get a theory as the reply. You move away from feeling and activity.

A corrective experience is possible if you do something new, but doing something will feel like doing something wrong. (I wondered here if this applies to therapists too.) For example Peter may touch a client's arm and the client may not respond to this, or may not like it but Peter may keep doing this. Again the sensory is important. Many therapies prohibit touch. For Peter if touch does not come into it then the therapy is incomplete. People who have a good experience of touch can work in therapy without touch, those who have not, can't. *Peter recommended watching Dr. Allan Schore, the neurobiologist on YouTube for his understanding of early development.*

Peter talked of the way therapist and client are together during therapy. The way the client is in the therapy room, the way they sit, move, breathe is how they are in the world. As therapy is co-therapy the therapist will be different with different clients, for example whether the therapist is being quiet or being active. The question here is not whether therapy is being helpful but whether it is new. For the therapist there is the moment of seeing an opening which can be filled. Freedom for the therapist is an important part of the approach.

The way Peter described Gestalt left me wondering whether my psychodynamic approach is sensibly restrained or creatively inhibited. Aggression does play a central part in psychodynamic theory but seems to have a different place in Gestalt. We are an aggressive species and this is also part of our creativity. Aggression is part of our being active participants in our world and in participating we change it.

Unfortunately I share some of the misconceptions of Gestalt Peter mentioned like bashing cushions and talking to empty chairs. Fritz Perls was against a cathartic method. Our emotions orient us to the world. The idea that we need to get rid of emotions is inimical to Gestalt. Perls would sometimes ask people to amplify an action, for example hitting a chair arm, but did so in order to find out what this means. Gestalt is not a discharge method but a way of restoring contact with the world.

Peter brought alive his approach with a demonstration. He had a therapeutic conversation with one of the people attending this seminar. I have followed the NWRPA's custom in not summarising this part of the seminar in the newsletter. It struck me that this live demonstration seemed quite natural in this seminar but Peter is from a different therapeutic tradition. I have only once seen a demonstration of this kind from psychodynamic therapists and in that case it was a fictionalised role play.

In writing this summary it struck me that Peter conveyed a clear sense of a therapeutic approach that is different from my own. As you will all know our seminars attract a varied group of therapists and trainees. Taking the point that we all will have fairly coherent senses of ourselves in the world of this seminar, my impression was that everybody attending on the Friday was deeply involved in the flow of the seminar.

Thanks to Peter for encouraging us all to be active participants in this particular world.

Contact the Association:

Frank Kelley, Secretary NWRPA,
53 Milford Drive, Levenshulme, Manchester M19 2RY

Phone: 0161 432 8653 (Evenings)

Email: nwrpa2010@ntlworld.com

Website: www.nwrpa.org.uk
