

Gestalt Exercises*

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Psychotherapeutic exercises have been a particular interest of mine since early in my career. I started introducing these systematically in certain workshops at a time when I worked at Esalen in the late 60s. After Fritz left for Canada, I conducted two kinds of workshop there: Some (in collaboration with Bob Hall and Jack Downing) were regular Gestalt workshops (Jim Simkin conducted the training workshops at the time); in others I took advantage of the opportunity given to me by my sponsors to be innovative and devoted the mornings to meditation, the evenings to Gestalt hot seat work, and the afternoons to something in between: exercises in small groups where I explored the interface between meditation and encounter.

I think that much of what happens in psychotherapy is truly the doing of the patient, inasmuch as it is an internal process out of which converge the will to see and the will to heal. Psychotherapy, from one point of view, might be seen as a context in which this inner event can happen: as support for a self-therapeutic process. Whatever the measure of help that can be offered by the being and skill of the therapist anyhow, there is such a thing as working on one's self psychologically, and many people do so gropingly even without exposure to formal psychotherapy or spiritual guidance.

This view of mine on the possibility and importance of work on self therapy—supported by Fritz's own invitation to self therapy in the Gestalt exercises in the beginning of the 1951 classic, *Gestalt Therapy*—always interested me in devising interpersonal structures that would embody general therapeutic principles and might thus be helpful ways for people to carry out mutually assisted work on themselves. In the course of the years I have even refined the mini-lab situation to the point of obtaining substantial therapeutic results through the supervision of such a process of people working with each other.

I had occasion to use therapeutic exercises for small groups intensively in the early 70s, in connection with the teaching experiment that became "SAT Institute"—an

* From *Gestalt Therapy: The Attitude & Practice of Atheoretical Experientialism* (Nevada City, CA: Gateways, 1993), pages 235-248).

aspect of which was the engineering of a group into a self-healing system. Small group exercises in this venture served both a therapeutic and a training aim, and among them there was a series of “Gestalt drills” in which I sought to provide an opportunity for participants to concentrate on the development of specific skills such as listening, monitoring their awareness continuum, observing body language, reflecting, and so on.

The Gestalt exercises that I have collected in this chapter have in common a dual relevance to therapy and training. The first three—emphasizing the sense of presence and the sense of *I/You* as distinct from *I/It* in place of the other—I have come to regard a desirable background to all psychotherapy training, along with all aspects of the awareness continuum. The particular description of the latter, given next, is taken (except for the introductory comments) from a workshop transcript, and illustrates one particular variation of that genre which I am calling “the awareness continuum in a meditation context.” “Meditation context” here stands not only for the “meditation field” provided by the meditative attitude of the listener, but for the confinement of the meditation awareness itself in view of an understanding of meditation through selective emphases on such issues as letting go, body awareness, feeling awareness, panoramic awareness, and so on.

Also the last series of exercises, concerning topdog/underdog conflict, constitute an excellent opportunity for training as well as a therapeutic opportunity in that the coaching of a person through its four stages involves, besides the exercise of intuition, the skill to stimulate emotional expression, and anger in particular.

When I did and shared my spiritual recipe, I could not fail to appreciate Fritz in retrospect for the *I/You* exercise that he prescribed that I had failed either to practice or pass along with the rest of the Gestalt heritage. Fritz’s exercise was one in which two people were actually saying strings of *I*’s and *You*’s in different combinations and rhythms in alternation.

Just as I then felt that the experience did not go much further than a word game, there may be others who have failed to appreciate the important issues involved: *I-ness* in balance with the sense of *other-ness*. Some of the exercises I discovered myself and described for others may be of help for others who have never focused before on the

I/You issue. I have applied them to many groups of people who have found them both personally meaningful and a substantial aspect of their professional training.

Though I have presented here the three “I/You” exercises in such little space that they may be read in virtually no time, I think that the experience of each deserves the opportunity of deepening through practice—particularly in group situations through rotation among group members over many meetings. Also, in the course of time, I have come to know well the training value of many of these exercises, particularly since the time I first devised a therapeutic training program, during the ‘70s in the SAT Institute. Since then I have liked best a situation that is neither one of pure therapy nor one of professional training: a hybrid one of developing the potential therapists among laymen, while shaping groups into self-therapizing psychological self-maintaining systems.

Though in this activity of combining sophisticated microlab work and therapeutic training I have drawn on inspiration beyond Gestalt therapy alone, my practice has naturally been strongly influenced by Gestalt; for the purpose of this chapter I am selecting some exercises that can be regarded as direct embodiments of Gestalt ideas.

I. I/You exercises

The first exercise, below, may be seen both as a development of something implicit in Gestalt therapy and as a borrowing from Sufism: the exercise of focusing on the sense of presence or selfhood. The second, likewise, may be regarded both as an elaboration of something already present in the Gestalt approach and a borrowing: the cultivation of the sense of personhood of the other, the sense of “You” in contradistinction to the experience of “it.” Working separately both with myself and with others on these two techniques, I naturally discovered the power of their combination: the exercise of being at the same time mindful of self and of others’ presence and being.

1. Presence

Sit face to face with one another—and close your eyes.

Pay attention to your body sensations, posture and facial expression, and make any corrections in posture or attitude as such awareness may invite.

Be as you want to be—moment after moment.

Now open your eyes, yet remaining still in body and thought.

Relax your eyes, yet remaining still in body and thought.

Relax your body and let yourself be at ease, not trying to do anything and as you allow your mind to become silent, concentrate on the sense of existing—

Feel “I am here.”

After some time concentrating on the I-sense while relaxing with a silent mind, bring your breathing into awareness and shift your attention from “I” to “here” and mentally repeat I—am—here in synchrony with in-breath, pause, and out-breath (don’t attempt to do anything in particular during the out-breath pause).

Go on with as much continuity of attention as possible.

2. *You-ness*

As before, begin by sitting face to face, closing your eyes, optimizing your posture, attitude, and state.

Then, after a time of letting yourself be in peace as much as you can, open your eyes, while you sit, physically relaxed and centered engaging in neither verbal nor nonverbal dialogue—forget yourself as much as possible while you focus on the sense that the person before you *truly exists*, is a person and not a thing, a conscious being seeing you.

3. *I/You*

After preparatory centering as before, here the two continuing to sustain mental silence with open eyes and with the support of physical relaxation, concentration on both “I” and “you,” while at the same time evoking a sense of infinity around them.

Try it—seeking to intensify at the same time the sense of presence in self and other and a sense of cosmic depth.

Let the sense of infinity support your relaxation and dissolve your mind.

Perhaps you may find it useful to say at times subvocally: I—You—Infinity.

II. *The awareness continuum in a meditative context*

The awareness continuum is to Gestalt therapy what free association is to psychoanalysis: both the beginning and the end of therapy. The beginning, in that it provides the mirror in

which a person's psychological difficulties are reflected and from which the therapist takes his cues; the end, in that, just as the ability to free associate without resistance may be regarded as a sign of completeness of analysis, the ability to experience fulfillment and depth in every here-and-now is the goal of Gestalt.

I believe that, despite much talk about the awareness continuum, its practice is not given all the attention it deserves—for it tends not to be viewed enough as a *practice*—the practice of a healthy present-centered attitude—but, rather, merely a point of departure for other therapeutic interventions and directions.

Since I regard it as a valuable psychological exercise in its own right, and one which will be best carried out with the stimulus of interpersonal communication, I usually schedule it as a complement to therapy proper, and—in variations such as the one below—as a part of training.

Those who have experience with the awareness continuum exercise cannot have failed to notice that, as is the case with psychological exercises in general, it is sometimes fulfilling and productive, sometimes superficial: a string of seemingly meaningless self-reports, most typically an inventory of perceptions: Now I look at the rug, now I hear a car passing by, etc. Where is the mystery? What is it that makes the act of becoming-aware-of-the-moment something deep; that which causes on occasion the act of awareness to be profound?

I think that the answer can be approached in several ways, one of which is the experience of *presence*, the experience of “I am Here.” There are times when we experience ourselves as *things* and times when we experience ourselves as *humans*. This might seem to be a matter of grace—as the perception of the world in general: sometimes the tree before our house is of little interest to us, whereas as at other times we see its beauty shine; the world is sometimes opaque, whereas at other times it has meaning—(not an intellectual but an affective deepening of mind that is the object of meditation practices); yet a listener may be able to help in a way completely different from what is usually cultivated in the practice of psychotherapy: not through anticipating, not through the effort to understand, but through a concern about *being there* in a more substantial way, by increasing so-to-say the density of his being, so that a deeper silence may attract to it a deeper communication. This is the exercise I want to propose to you now: a “here

and now” exercise in which one person performs the classical Gestalt exercise (about which I will add certain details), while the listener listens in a particular manner.

Let me now describe a bit further the role of both as well as the role of a third party, who will be in the position of a supervisor. We will be working in groups of three, rotating so that each person will have ten minutes to work.

I have just used the word “work,” a word prominent in Fritz Perls’ vocabulary. Though working with him (or with other therapists) involved a willingness to follow directions and not to become defensive in the face of painful truths, this awareness continuum exercise (the basic Gestalt situation) is already “work” enough by itself. It is, in the first place, work of attention. Attention can be superficial or deep, gross or subtle, sustained or intermittent. And it is also work to dare, and there is work in relinquishing the habitual manipulation of our own mind. Just as in the life of meditation it may require much work to come to the state of peace, so that non-doing is effortful before it can become effortless, there is work in going with the mind where *it* wants to go. I think that this organismic aspect of the flow of experience is sometimes not given enough attention in Gestalt practice. I think that even Fritz Perls’ word “continuum” in the expression “continuum of awareness” may have implied a quasi-poetic allusion to the multidimensionality of awareness and the fact that at every moment we can attend to innumerable possible experiences: sounds, visuals, emotions, what we are doing, our voice, and so on. Not only do different fields of awareness intersect in every moment so that any one of them can beckon to us and lead us in a particular direction; if we resist the temptation of becoming an active manipulator of our experience, but are truly sensitive to where our attention wants to go, there will be a particular psychic flow—whether we interpret this in terms of figure/ground formation, self-regulation, or simple spontaneity or inspiration. This very simple act may take much daring, to surrender to what comes. It requires much courage and also humility; it requires many things, this “being open to experience.”

If you are willing to say what you have not rehearsed, if you are willing to be surprised by what you say, you might have to let go of your self image. You either express or impress. Much of what gets done in the awareness continuum is still within the bounds of a role, within the boundary of not creating a bad impression. And I say all this

because I think what happens in an exercise of such simplicity depends on your degree of freedom; depends on how much you allow to occur and how much you appreciate the indefinite potential of your exploration. It is up to you to make it into a trivial exercise or a great occasion; it all depends on how open you are and sincere in your desire to work.

I want to recommend to those who are speaking—in a monologue—to take into consideration the three basic realms of awareness: perceptions, feeling and actions. At any time you are aware of what comes to you through the outer senses as well as through your body sense. You are aware of what you are doing, not only with your body and voice, but intra-psychically (such as waiting to have something to report, or choosing between attending to one thing or another), and you are aware of your emotions. I want to suggest that you don't remain stuck in any particular realm. Be sure that your exercise does not result only in an enumeration of perceptions or in the observation of what you are doing. Keep moving, keep rotating, yet emphasizing the observation and expression of *feelings*. It is feelings that interest us more. It is the feeling life that needs to be unveiled; yet it is useful, in order to become aware of your emotions, that you are grounded in your perceptions, so that you can inquire into what you feel *on the occasion* of each one of your perceptions like this. Do not simply report the movements, postures, inflections of voice that you observe, but use observations of your actions to inquire as to how you feel *while* you act: use your actions as a mirror for your feelings.

Now I turn to instructions for the listener. The listener sits face to face with the speaker and inhibits not only verbal language (as is appropriate to a monologue) but body language as well. Offer your partner the experience of having a *mere* witness, one who is simply there without giving cues, without approving or disapproving. Inhibit smiles, shoulder shrugs, and so on, and adopt a meditative stance: do nothing but being present. Relax your face, relax your eyes, relax your tongue (which is active even during internalized, nonvocal talk). And I want to invite you also to not try to understand what your partner says. You will probably notice that by not trying you will understand better, not less. Instead of trying to understand, put your effort *in attending*; putting your attention both inside and outside: what you see, the voice and words you hear and also how you feel moment after moment. In ordinary conversations there is a certain amount of implicit preparation for responding. Here, let yourself be at rest without another task

than that of attending to the moment—to your partner. Let your only exercise be that of continuous non-judgmental attention. What you are offering your partner is pure presence. Nothing more—and yet something the effect of which, I think you will observe, is not just trivial. And not so easy—since there is so much compulsion to help, compulsion to respond, and the speaker may sometimes feel abandoned.

The third person is a supervisor. He sits next to the couple. Two people are facing each other and the supervisor sits between them on the side. The supervisor will do one of the things the therapist does: point out the infringement of the Gestalt rule—i.e., point out when what is said is not an expression of experience: when he is going on a tangent, into explaining, into abstractions, telling a story, anticipating, and so on. The supervisor also attends to the compulsive gestures of the listener who is supposed to stay relaxed: nods, automatic gestures, etc., and brings them to his or her attention.

III. Topdog/underdog exercises

I think we all know how a topdog/underdog encounter often constitutes the peak of a Gestalt session—the point of an explosive transition to a healthier state.

Since anybody who has internal problems has a topdog or superego, and since to every topdog there is an underdog, I think that the issue of self-control, self-hate, and self-manipulation is ever present in the neuroses. Thus one may choose at any moment to focus upon this essential split that sustains the conflict. This being so, it lends itself ideally to systematization, and the series of exercises I describe below constitute a stepwise progression that I have devised for a mutually assisted therapy setting.

First Stage:

Self-accusation as a catharsis of superego rage

Catharsis, Aristotle tells us, is the very point of drama; this being so, it seems most appropriate to use dramatization as a means for making explicit (and thus bringing into awareness) the hateful self-control that is normally implicit in neurotic function and psychosomatic disorders. (The Argentinean psychoanalyst Angel Garman used to speak of “the biting of the superego on the gastric mucosa.”)

On beginning this exercise I usually explain that when the behavioral channels for the expression of anger are blocked through an internalized prohibition, it will be difficult to experience the emotion of rage, and that conversely, the dramatization may facilitate access to the feeling. (I here may use the metaphor of “priming the pump”: “hamming it up,” as Fritz used to say, until the water of emotion begins to flow into the words, voice, and gestures.)

Second Stage:

Underdog reversal

Rather than replaying the usual topdog/underdog game, I skip to underdog reversal—the most dramatic application of reversal technique I know in the implicit Gestalt heritage: I here ask group members to impersonate their underdog (that is, the personality that was the target of topdog’s accusation in the earlier exercise), but not a pleading, guilty and suffering underdog; rather, one who is aware of the deformity and destructiveness of topdog’s injunctions; to take the side of the oppressed not to stay oppressed; to rebel, to throw off topdog’s yoke and tell topdog off with a full display of anger in words and gesture.

Third and Fourth Stages:

Topdog reversal and working towards a contract

When the above described exercise is wholeheartedly engaged in, it may—as in some successful hot seat sessions—being about a major psychological breakthrough: a measure of liberation from topdog and consequently increased internal freedom. It is my impression that this is not a definitive freedom, however, nor is the state of seeming freedom from topdog enduring. Another layer of psychological obstruction is likely to become apparent in time, and in the end topdog is not amputated but assimilated. The end of the topdog/underdog situation, with slashes in each polarity, in other words, is a process of synthesis, integration, dialectic purification.

For this to happen, I believe, topdog needs to abdicate—from within as it were—out of a full understanding of what he is doing and wish to come out of an impossible situation (which implies a wish to serve the healing process).

The reversal of underdog is only half of healing the basic split of the psyche. The other half is the reversal of topdog: the willingness on the part of our controlling, angry self to give up its tyranny of the psyche and to become vulnerable and feeling.

I think that this reversal involves nothing short of diving into the part of topdog, for the superego is like a parent we have created to protect and assist us, originally, and our superego only wants to help.

The trouble is that our superego is impatiently angry, wanting us to be different *now*—and that is not in the nature of things. Couldn't we perhaps educate topdog into a perception of the impossible situation that it is creating, an understanding that thought its tyrannical assertion in the psyche it can never find the satisfaction it so greedily demands? Couldn't we perhaps persuade it into a willingness to help toward the realization of its ideal without imposing it? Therein might lie some possibility.

Topdog reversal (through which the person is invited to switch from angry accusation to getting in touch, as topdog, with his frustrated wishes and to express them in an attitude of vulnerability), seems like such an appropriate gateway to further dialogue between the dominant and dominated subselves, that only conceptually I distinguish between these stages. In practice I propose them as steps in an uninterrupted process. As I introduce group members to this stage of the process, I suggest that they begin by giving topdog (the inner parent) a voice, while in an attitude of willingness to listen to underdog in a child and its needs. I compare the situation to that of two subpersonalities condensed, sharing the same body, and underscore the importance of learning to leave together in the best possible way. I also invite the working out of agreements, the moving toward a new contract.

As may be imagined, in a training situation—where individuals are receiving the stimulus and support of one or more peers in small groups—the power of this series of exercises may compare with that of a nonstructured Gestalt session, and I have even witnessed, at least once, the occurrence of a psychological death experience—and “ego death,” the gist of which was a heartfelt abdication of a superego from its tyrannical rule.