

# Finding Self Through Gestalt Therapy

Fritz Perls delivered "Finding Self Through Gestalt Therapy" as part of the Cooper Union Forum Lecture Series: "The Self" in New York City on March 6, 1957. The talk includes many of the same ideas set forth in writing in *Psychiatry in a New Key*. We have here a taste of Fritz charming, boring, infuriating and amazing an audience as he continued to do throughout his life. Fortunately, the talk was transcribed including the long pauses and the question and answer contact between Fritz and his audience.

Joe Wysong  
Editor  
*The Gestalt Journal*

## Cooper Union Forum - Lecture Series: "The Self"

### "Finding Self Through Gestalt Therapy"

#### Frederick S. Perls

Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen: I see quite a number of people still coming in which reminds me of an old psychoanalytical saying "If you're too early, you're anxious; if you are on time, you are obsessive; and if you're late, you're hostile." So, I hear you jeering at this. Well, one can say, "Whatever you do is not right." Or one can just say, "Well, let's classify people in one of the three headings." In any case, I hope that the hostility of the late comers will not influence us too much.

You see, my friends tell me I am a very bad lecturer and a very good teacher. So, right now, I feel very, very confused. I don't know what to do, what to say to you, because I don't know what you want. I know what I want. I want to get something across, but what do you want? You see, this is my basic question. Whether I deal with a group, or with a patient, I think the basic idea is first to establish: what do you want? Now, what does a patient want from a therapist? A shoulder to cry on? Does he want somebody to confess to? Does he want a better memory? In any case he wants something. So, I wish I knew what you want.

You see, I don't think I can give you something through a lecture. I don't think words can convey anything, especially anything about Gestalt therapy. Maybe some of you know something about a peculiar philosophy, Zen Buddhism. If you know something about Zen, or even if you know something about General Semantics and the significances of the non-verbal level, I might be able to convey something to you. But in order to convey something, we first of all have to establish communication.

Now, communication takes place, like everything, in a "field." And the field is, like in modern physics, the basis of Gestalt therapy. We are here in a field. In this field there are a number of people, and there is me. It's a peculiar, let's say "Boundary" between me and you. Or as Buber, a famous Jewish existentialist, would say "between the 'I' and 'the thou'." This is, now, the essence of the 'self.' The self is that part of the field which is opposed to the otherness. You see, you can look for the self. Does the "self" exist? Does the "I" exist? Can you dissect the brain and find the "I," or the "superego," or the "self?" Definitely not. I think this is obvious. So what is this "self?" Now the "self" cannot be understood other than through the field, just like day cannot be understood other than by contrast with night. If there were eternal day, eternal lightness, not only would you not have the concept of a "day", you would not even have the awareness of a "day" because there is nothing to be aware of, there is no differentiation. So, the "self" is to be found in the contrast with the otherness. There is a boundary between the self and the other, and this boundary is the essence of psychology. Inside this boundary, this contact boundary where you and I meet, inside the boundary there are other disciplines: there is physiology, there is anatomy, and so on. And outside this boundary there is geography and sociology and so on. But psychology is exclusively interested in, and its place is exclusively, where the self and the other meet. Or, if you are outside the field, where a person and society clash, where an organism is embedded in its environment. Now this contact boundary, to be sure, is nothing rigid. It is something that is always, always moving. There is

always something either coming into the foreground or receding. But we always meet. Whether I look at you and my eyes meet a "picture" that I can't see beyond, whether I hear, whether I feel and touch, always, where I meet the other there is the boundary. There is awareness. There is experience.

Now we come to the basis of our approach. Namely, we consider ourselves, as I consider myself right now, a part of the field. If I am with the field and experience myself and my reactions as part of the field, then I use myself as a tool of therapy. I get involved. I can get involved with the total field situation, which we call "sympathy." Or I can keep myself out and look at the patient only through the microscope; then I feel "empathy." Or I am not interested; then we call it "apathy." Who listens? There is nothing going on.

Now, what is going on in this field? What is the contact function of myself and the environment? Well, basically it is in the human being the idea of communication. Now what do we communicate and what do we want to communicate? Well, let us first look at the different stages of communication as applying to therapy. I would say the first stage is non-communication. The patient doesn't know what he wants; he has nothing to communicate. Whatever he wants or needs, as they say in the Freudian jargon, is repressed. He is not aware of anything. So, after a while, I am aware of something in the patient. I see that you are playing with your hands, you are doing this . . . , you are kicking with your foot. In other words, I can already have some communication.

Rather, the patient, without knowing it, communicates something to me with his gesture language, often called "fidgeting." Now this fidgeting is the most important language with which the patient, at the non-communicative stage, tells us something:

If he does this. . . .he might tell us he wants to be stroked,

If he does this. . . . it means he probably wants to kick us, and

If he does this. . . . .it means "I am sad" or,

if he does this. . . . .it means "I could just bite you."

Now, from there, the state of non-communication develops into a state of inhibited communication. This means the patient feels something; he wants to cry; he has secrets but is ashamed to tell you this. This is the moment of the state of inhibition; he holds something in: *inhabile* (that cannot be handled or managed). And there you can always see the personal conflict: one part is turned against the other. We can then deal with this conflict and make clear to the patient that a part of him, which, for the time being, we call the "I" is turned against another part which we might call the "self." He is nagging himself, he is telling himself, he is punishing himself. And he is doing all kinds of things with himself, thereby encapsulating him. Instead of a contact boundary, which in the first state was completely missing, we have now a wall. Or, as Wilhelm Reich used to call it, we have an "armor" between him and the world. I can deal with the armor in several ways. I am going to talk about it somewhat later. Let me first finish the development. Now, if the patient does not hold back anymore, we then get the third stage, the exhibitionistic state or random communication. This is the state which the Freudians, or the psychoanalysts in general, are satisfied to achieve. In this state the patient exhibits his dreams, he exhibits his misery, his sins. He talks "about" himself. And I call it random communication because he puts, so to say, the cards on the table, waiting for somebody to pick up whatever he wants to. But this is not yet efficient communication.

The next state is the efficient communication, where you really express what you want, where the patient really makes contact with the therapist. And this is, again, in contrast to the psychoanalytical procedure which, as you know, derived a lot of its technique from Freud's own embarrassment. Freud was a person with tremendous difficulties in making contact. He was a brilliant writer but he couldn't go out, he couldn't meet people, he couldn't look at his patients. He complained they were staring at him. His whole neurosis was built upon avoidance of that anxiety which results out of a good contact.

Efficient communication is so important. You can feel an annoyance with your wife, but if you don't express it fully what happens? Well, you can hold it back. You can be on bad terms for weeks, days at least. But if you have it out, if you express "For Heaven's sake, let's have it out," even if you fight, even if you have a conflict which can't be solved, it is still better than "A certain person doesn't talk to me." You know all this kind of random communication we use to indulge in.

Right now I have nothing to communicate. (Long pause, with uneasy, random laughter from the audience)

Now, you see what I just did was a typical little piece of Gestalt therapy. I just expressed what I felt and through this expression I managed to go on, I reestablished contact. I felt a warm laughter. I felt that you were with me at this moment. I was able to finish this unpleasant situation, this bit of discomfort that I felt, and maybe you felt, when I became silent.

So, from there we come to the next important point of Gestalt Psychology and Gestalt therapy; namely, the importance of unfinished situations. You can believe in instincts. You can believe in two instincts, as the Freudians have it, or fourteen, as the Behaviorists want it, or you can believe in two million instincts, or unfinished situations, as I like to do. I believe that our organism is so complicated that every time something happens to it, is experienced by it, we are thrown out of balance and at each moment we have to regain this balance. The scientists call this state "homeostasis," this eternal attempt to regain our balance.

Now, in this disturbance of balance if something happens which, through something non-self, comes about then we have the unfinished situation. What does this mean? We have an urge, a simple urge. Let's say, "I'm hungry." I eat. Then the hunger situation is finished for the time being. But now let's assume something interferes. Something says, "Ah, this food is poisoned." Let's take the simple case of a paranoiac who thinks the food is poisoned, because he wants to poison everybody, so he believes his food is poisoned. This interrupts his need for food, his eating. So he stops. His hunger remains unsatisfied, and this is the only moment where we, in Gestalt therapy, relate ourselves and our patient to the past. Wherever we find an unfinished situation it means we are still carrying with us some business from the past which we have to finish. And if we don't do it, well, just think for a moment of the symptom of insomnia.

What is insomnia, other than the attempt to finish unfinished situations? Say you have a revenge which you haven't carried out, you want to "get even" with somebody. Somebody has hurt your self esteem. So you toss and turn until you finally hit on the idea, "Ah, this is what I would like to do to him." And then you get angry, not with the dog that is barking outside, but with the subject with whom you want to get angry. Then you can finish the situation either in reality or in fantasy. You might get enough emotional release to fall asleep and then you might have some dream wherein you actually finish him off. So, the need for finishing unfinished situations is another important item of Gestalt therapy.

The next point I would like to make is the Existential aspect. In Gestalt therapy we are Existentialists, in contrast to being moralists or symbolists. When you look into your relationships with people, into the relationship of yourself with yourself (or your "I" with your "self"), you find that you are always, always full of shoulds. "You should do this," "Don't do this," "This shouldn't be," "This isn't fair." In other words, you are always trying to change the world, to do something and, believing that good intentions are mere words of "you should," that these letters S-H-O-U-L-D would have an actual power of transforming reality.

In contrast to this we try to see what exists. And what does exist are contact functions that strive for creation, for creating situations in which you can complete your own vocation, in which you can be and experience. These situations are not achieved with "shoulds," but they are achieved with anxiety. And this is, I would say, perhaps my greatest difference with the psychoanalytical schools. To them anxiety and guilt are the "bugs" of the neuroses and they say you have to avoid creating anxiety in the patient.

This is exactly the issue about which we have to talk right now, the avoidance of anxiety. To be anxious is the basis of going forward, of becoming outgoing, of doing something. Now, what happens if you are anxious to do something and you do not dare to take the peep into the unknown? You stifle your anxiousness, and out of this former state of anxiousness you are no longer anxious to do something but you develop, instead, a state of anxiety. And, in this state of anxiety, there is the choice of creation. Think of the actor and his stage fright, and you can see the two possibilities of anxiety. Either you create defenses, or you create outgoing experiences. O.K. You might be able to create a mess, a rumpus, a piece of art. Essentially, what you want is to create something new, something that is not routine. Because, if you are in a state of routine, and this is, what happens to most, or many of us, you are bored with life, life goes by, nothing is worthwhile, and once this tendency towards routine, towards living in a safe place has started our anxiety is then invested in defense mechanisms. We make sure that we have enough to eat tomorrow, we make sure that we get to our job in time, we make sure of this, we make sure of that. The more you

make sure, the more insecure you become. Because you can't make sure, because the drive toward the world is there. The only state in which you can be absolutely sure is the catatonic state, where you are dead.

Now, this anxiety is based on the basic energy in us, of the basic being of the human organism, namely, to be excited. You can be either bored (or indifferent), or excited. The excitement is not always visible as excitement. The excitement can be blocked. Let's start from there. For example, it can happen, as it did right now to a number of you, that you block your excitement and your interest, and then you are bored. I saw a number of people just now yawning. So, let's interrupt this, at this moment, and do a little bit of Gestalt therapy, of Gestalt group therapy, in order to do something about the interest that is not here, in this field. May I please ask all of you, or those who want to play, to close your eyes and imagine you are leaving this room right now. Go, in fantasy, go outside, go to wherever you like to go. I will call you back in a minute's time. (general laughter from the audience)

Silence. (little more than half a minute)

I see at least one lady who was very bored before, now happy and smiling. And, I hope that one or another of you has also, in the meantime experienced the essence of the unfinished situation. Maybe you went home or somewhere else, and tried to finish a situation which was unfinished which you still have to finish. All right, you did it only in fantasy and, if I have time enough, I might still talk about that. But I hope that you are now a little bit more excited, at least, that you can produce enough excitement to pay attention. Of course, if I have nothing to communicate you cannot possibly pay attention, you would rather go off to other places. Now, this excitement is not always there as excitement. You see, it changes. It changes mostly into emotions. Excitement, for instance, can manifest itself first as impatience, then as rage or anger. Or it turns out as sexual excitement and it can turn into affection and enthusiasm. Or the excitement of grief. There are all kinds of forms of emotions into which excitement turns. Now then, when this emotion is used by ourselves for creative purposes, the whole catharsis theory is rubbish. Nature is not so wasteful as to create emotions to throw them away.

Emotions are the very means of our ability to make contact. Even if I hit somebody, it might not be a pleasant contact, but, at least, it is contact. If I talk to somebody, it is contact, or potential contact. But contact is established only if it has the support of your feelings, of your convictions. A scientist who wants to talk to a scientific audience needs the support of his knowledge, of his interest, in conveying something to that audience. Now, anxiety is excitement minus oxygen. You get excited but you don't breathe, and because you don't breathe the heart action has to race, to bring more red blood particles to the different tissues of the organism. To cope with a state of anxiety, breathe fully and, in fantasy at least, take the leap into the future, dare to do whatever you want to do. Not necessarily in reality, and then consider the alternative. "If I don't do the things I want to do, if I build, instead, defense mechanisms, if I am afraid, what happens then?"

By the way, as I want to conclude these thoughts on anxiety, know that breathing means exhaling. There is a fetish in our time about breathing, the big chest, the he-man fetish that thinks breathing is inhaling. But breathing means throwing out the bad air. You would not go to a basin and wash your hands with the water, dirty water, half full in the basin. And you don't pour clean water on top of it. Now the same with breathing. First get rid of the bad air, the carbon dioxide, and then bring in the fresh air. If you can do this, the acute state of anxiety, or asthma, will very quickly disappear. As a matter of fact, in asthma, you often see children forcefully exhaling, "Wwhueeeue . . ." "whueeeue . . ." Thus nature takes over. But the child is being told to "breathe." To him this means to inhale, and thus you create an artificial conflict in him. And the same applies to the orgasm, to the sexual situation. If you don't exhale fully you cannot have a full sexual experience.

Now, as to the other idea of psychoanalysis, guilt as one of the basis of neurosis. Let me give you a kind of short cut. I know how dangerous it is to give short cuts if you are not fully versed with the material. But I think this little short cut, let's call it a gimmick, I can use here; it can't do any harm.

It might, possible, ease the situation a bit. Especially in regard to guilt. It is a very, very simple gimmick which can help you when you feel terribly, terribly guilty and you do all kinds of things to atone and to pay for your debts and your guilt. It is the realization that guilt is nothing but reversed resentment. There are two expressions which you have to rediscover. One is "I feel so hurt." If you translate it and say, instead, "I feel so vindictive," you are much nearer the mark. I can examine you to see where you feel hurt, or where your poor, poor mother is hurt when you come home late. If you examine where she is hurt, she isn't hurt

anywhere, but she feels very mad at you. The same with guilt feelings. The other expression, "I should not have done it" can be translated, always, "You should not have done it." Also, instead of "I feel so guilty that I didn't do thus and so," say instead, "I feel resentful that you didn't do thus and so." You will be amazed how quickly you can sense that this is right, that it clicks, that these guilt "feelings" and the "feeling hurt" were merely hypocritical. They were not honest feelings, they were not genuine. (long pause).

How is the boredom? (another long pause)

I wish this was discussion time and you would ask me something, I would like to know what you want, whether you understood, whether I could make myself clearer, whether we have efficient communication or not. I wish I could elaborate on this point, or that point, but, apparently, I have to go on giving my monologue. (laughter) Well, let me ask something. (turns to Fairchild, the chairman).

Yah, I am not allowed yet to . . . (laughter)

Well, then, let me tell you something about my idea of a "no mind" organism. I don't believe that we have a "mind." This sounds very funny, I know. You see, I believe that we have, still, a mentality like the pre-Socratean naturalist. They thought the universe was made out of earth, water, air and fire. So, we believe we are made out of a body, and a soul, and a mind, and a libido, and an unconscious that is sandwiched between the mind and the body. And especially, there is always the "mind" that is looked upon as an entity, as opposed to the body, the "mind," where the associations are running along and pulling each other, as on a string, and somewhere these are connected with the body. I don't know. How? There are some vague theories of Freud about "psychological equivalent" but these are never made clear. Then there is another theory of a "psycho-physical parallelism," that whatever happens in the physical world happens, at the same time on the mental level, or vice-versa. Now, my idea is this, I think the difference between earth and water is not that of different entities but, rather, a difference of quantity. For example; ice, water steam and H<sub>2</sub>O are different from each other merely by the quantity of temperature and density. Steam is existential, and H<sub>2</sub>O is symbolic, a representation of the real thing. Something similar to this, I believe, is the case with us.

There is first the basis. Let us call it the "animal self." Here, we are like little children, merely organic beings with their needs, their primitive functions, though often very differentiated functions, and their feelings.

The next layer would be a diminished layer. I call this the "as if" layer, or the "social layer." In the social system the loss of nature is replaced by rules of games. Society always copies nature very badly, and the worse the copy, the imitation, the counterfeit, the easier it will be for a whole nation to perish. The closer the rules of society, the laws, come to the laws of nature, which cannot be violated without punishment, the more survival value that society will have. Let us imagine a society that says, "O. K., now let us play tennis, but if you go beyond this white line, that is a taboo, you violate the rules. If you violate the rules, and play beyond the white line, you will be punished by death." Of course, this is absurd and I think you realize that I deliberately exaggerated this example. But realize that whatever society is, and does, is an "as if" function. It is a game, a game unfortunately, which many people take damn seriously. And this game is played by different rules in different societies, primitive societies and higher societies. But what is always there is the game. And what is always there is a training in this game, a ritual of doing things together so that one is sure that everybody follows the same rules, so that we all "play cricket." You can see that this "as if" function is already less intense than the real function. If I pretend to be friendly, and assume a character, an appearance, then I don't invest as much of my energy as when I really mean to be friendly. The whole idea of character structure belongs to this "as if," this "social layer."

The next layer is the "fantasy layer," often called "mind." Please realize when we talk about "mind," in this context, we don't mean something opposed to the body. Rather, we mean something like the organism or the body, but in a very minute scale. It was Freud, really, who first pointed out the importance of this. Unfortunately, he lost it later on. He called the thinking process a "probe-handling," a "trial act." Now, this is actually what you have a fantasy, or a mind, for. Don't be dismayed by the word "fantasy," it does not mean that you have to be irrational. There is a rational fantasy and irrational fantasy, just as our actions can be rational or irrational. If you want to buy a piece of bread in a strange town it is very rational to start by imagining, "I could go this way, or in that other direction, where I saw those shops." In other words, you first buy in fantasy. As a matter of

fact, in all the "making sure" business I spoke about in relation to anxiety, you find a tremendous amount of fantasy work involved.

You may have to see your boss the next morning so you start rehearsing, "What am I going to say to him?" "What is he going to say?" And so on. All the time you try to make sure, you imagine, you fantasize what will happen. Then you are amazed, because the one thing you forgot to rehearse will happen.

Now, the next layer would be covered by the isolation, or rarification, or "objectivation layer." Here you tear sounds and tools out of their context and make them ready for a new organization. For example, an ape has tools too. He takes a stick and gets a banana down. But he throws the stick away and the stick doesn't exist anymore; it recedes in the background. But once we isolate this stick and make this stick a tool, always handy when need it, then it becomes an object, not just a "means whereby," as before. The same with sounds. Take these original sounds, "aruah-gooah." If I use the word "aruah-gooah" often enough in connection with this then finally, "aruah-gooah" will be a means of communication, if I say this to somebody else, he will bring me this "aruah-gooah," or whatever it is. Of course, I cannot go into any greater detail into the whole question of the relationships of symbolism, and language. I suggest that you read Wittgenstein (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and the *Philosophical Investigations*) about it.

Now, the next stage, the final stage, is where we combine and organize these symbols and tools into machines and language. The essence of a healthy person is that there is a unity, an integration of all the layers; he does not live merely in one level. He does not use just "words," but his words do have feelings and visions and convey all the senses. Words are used as tools. The same with machines, with gadgets, and so on. In other words, by integrating all these five layers we become truly ourselves, which means, we can discover the other, the world. Because, this is the paradox: the more we have the other, the world, the more we can be ourselves. The more we lose the other, the more we become selfish and self-centered. And the more self-centered we become, again, paradoxically enough, the less we are our real selves because, then, we are open to all kinds of intrusions from others.

#### QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q: You ask, "What does the patient want to know, what does he want?" Well, I think I have an idea what some patients may want, and that is, they want their analyst or therapist to help them find themselves. Is that too big an order?

Perls: This is something, again, on which I could talk for a long while. You know the essence. Or, let's put it this way, there are many dichotomies blooming in today's psychiatry, and you know, they always have dichotomies, body and mind, infantilism and maturity, and so on. Now one of these dichotomies is this idea that there is such a thing as infantilism and maturity. If a child at an age of five years behaves like a child of three years, is this infantile or mature? You see how arbitrary this idea is. The fact is that we mature all the time, that our development, and this is the essence of growth, is from complete environmental support to a possible complete self-support. But, the child still needs a lot of support. He needs to be carried, he needs to be fed, as he gets older, he needs financial support, he has to be given emotional support, encouragement, and so on. Now the essence of the neurosis is that, the neurotic, instead of developing his own self support puts all his energy into manipulating the environment for support. For instance, a neurotic person cannot appreciate himself, so he tears himself to pieces to get the world to appreciate him. He has not enough self esteem, emotional self support. This is where "wanting" is of such great importance. It is so simple. We find out what does the patient want from the therapist and then, we see, this is the very thing he lacks, he needs. Here is the very attitude which remained undeveloped, unfinished in him. And then, rather than providing a goose chase into the past to see where did he transfer this unfinished situation from, and so on, and so on, we find out right now, what is he lacking? How can we develop this lacking appreciation as, for instance, in this case?

Now, when we find, for instance, that he is depreciating himself, nagging himself all the time, we take this nagging and direct it toward us. Here we find out that he actually wants to nag us, to get and squeeze some appreciation out of us. From this he learns to appreciate his ability to nag and, so, he develops some confidence from there.

Q: I would like the doctor to explain, what is the real relation between the word "gestalt," which is "form," and therapy. And then there is another aspect of the word "gestalt," in philosophy, as used by Kant. I would like to know the difference between the

philosophic and psychologic aspects of the word.

Chairman: Oh, I'd like to hear it. (laughter)

Perls: Wait, I think it will be more interesting to explain what the experience, or the essence of a gestalt, is rather than give a definition or its historical development. You see, we couldn't live if we would register all the millions of shapes and forms, which we encounter day by day, without bringing some order into them. And we bring order into them by inherent ability of any organism, the human as well as the animal organism, to form gestalts. Now, a gestalt is a cohesive "one" which you can't cut up into different parts. You can, for instance, tear a house down into bricks, into windows, and so on. And when you have all the rubble there, you can count them, but it's not a house anymore. Now, take a quite well known gestalt, a melody. A melody can be transposed so that each part, each note, is different from the one that was before, but the melody, the gestalt, is still the same. So, the word "gestalt" comes from the German word "gestalten." It means "form," to make a form, a comprehensive "one." You see, our time is very much inclined to analyze, to cut things up, to cut people up. Very much so. Which reminds me of a very typical thing about growth and this cutting up. An old teacher of anatomy always told me "Be very careful when you cut up a corpse. You see, in a living being the tissue grows again and the scar heals, but when you cut a corpse, it never grows together again." This is the essence of the gestalt, the comprehensive whole, the perspective.

And, if you are interested in the philosophical situation, let me tell you this much. The whole idea of semantics, the whole idea of meaning, cannot really be understood without the gestalt approach, because a meaning is the relation of a foreground figure to its background. This sounds very strange to people who don't know anything about gestalt. Let me give an example of what I mean. Here, for instance, in a typewriter is a certain letter. This letter ("l"), can be read as "el" or as "one," you remember. If you put it in one context, let's say the word soldier, then this letter ("l"), this symbol, gets the meaning of "el." If you type 34135 then this same symbol ("l") suddenly takes on the meaning of a number. If you use any word, let's take "king," and use it in the context of a card game, this word has a different meaning than if held against the background, let us say, of the Buckingham Palace. So whatever there is, the gestalt, which means the relationship of one part compared with a context, a larger unit, is what gives meaning. If you ask for our meaning in life it means we place ourselves in relation to the universe, if our background is one of religion then we get our meaning, from our behavior, according to our religion.

Q: Dr. Perls, I've been asked very frequently by my well intentioned friends, who find me in therapy. "Well, look, if all you have to do is to find out what happened to you long ago, won't you grow?"

I reply to them that it is more like an emotional retraining. Would you settle this little detail?

Perls: Well, you see, we have to look at how we, or originally our environment but essentially we take responsibility or how we interrupt our ongoing, our natural processes. We interrupt our processes, we interrupt ourselves by tensing, by avoiding, by running away, by deviating our attention, and so on. Now, if we understand this type of interruption and, instead of interrupting ourselves, have the courage to interrupt our environment then we can take the choice whether we want to be polite and neurotic, or impolite and healthy. We can learn to become more outgoing in realizing that in interruption there is contact, and in non-interruption there is isolation and withdrawal from the world. Thus we come to taking up the interrupted development once again.

Q: Dr. Perls, you speak of a need to maintain a kind of, let's call it a kind of mental equilibrium, a homeostasis, if you will, or completion, as you put it. Perhaps now, can you tell me what is the reason for this, or the motivation or drive behind this need for closure or experience? And when you have completed that can you tell me of any empirical studies which will back up your statement, other than just clinical insights by gestaltists like yourself?

Perls: Well the question sounds very difficult, but actually it is very simple. Now, what happens if your organism is dehydrated? You know that, for survival, you need a certain amount of water in your organism. If it is dehydrated, you cannot think well, you cannot digest well, and so on. Just imagine we are living for ten days without water, in a hot desert. So you come across a gestalt in the environment, in the otherness, namely an oasis, the thing, that will attract your attention. Let us say you have a "minus" gallon of water in your system. To this "minus" gallon you add a "plus" gallon from the oasis, you put it into your system and you have a "plus minus," or zero, which is a balance. I call this, lately, a reaching of the "zero-need." I don't want to go into

technical terms but the essence is that we have a lot of "zero balances" required for optimal functioning. Whether you take the acid/alkaline balance, whether you take the amount of calcium, of hormones, and so on, that the body requires, there is always an optimum of functioning. For instance, an optimum of functioning of temperature is around 97 degrees. If you have a body temperature of 47 degrees, you can't function very well. So, the unfinished situation here is a need for a warmth of 30 degrees. There is always the tendency toward the achieving of this "zero point." If you have a surplus, then you want to get rid of this surplus. If you have a "minus" you want to take in this "minus." Each breath is such a completion of an incomplete situation. Just try to stop breathing for three or four minutes and then see if you can realize what an unfinished situation is.

Q: Dr. Perls, you mentioned before an idea that you had called the "no-mind." I wonder if you could elaborate on this with reference to the many arguments raised about the existence of a mind, the existence of a spirit within the body as an entity from the body, or relating in some way but still an entity, and how this fits into, whether this is a kind of mechanistic naturalism. Also whether this "as if" that you talk about, this "game," also explains religion, philosophy, art, aesthetics, and how all this fits into Gestalt therapy?

Chairman: Can you do this in about 10 seconds, doctor? (laughter)

Perls: Yah, but I want to be polite, I do not subscribe to any mechanistic nor idealistic, let's call it, *weltanschauung* (world outlook). All these mechanisms, idealisms, or mentalisms, they are all obstructions of a total whole. If you take a single pencil, a yellow pencil, you cannot say this yellow is the pencil, you cannot say the wood is the pencil, and you cannot say the carbon is the pencil. All together, this something can be, or is, a potential pencil. But again, only in the writing situation. I can use this same pencil as a kind of lever.

So, any kneeling down to words, as words, as absolutes torn out of their contexts is without meaning. That is why I emphasized before that any idea you have, any word you use, can be understood only if it is related, and clearly related, to the context. Otherwise, what you do is advertising, you tear things out of their context. You print just a few words, which are just the opposite of what the critic really meant, and you bluff your way through.

Q: Could you give us a little more information about the therapeutic value of breathing, in Gestalt therapy? Is that the same as the Yoga system of breathing?

Perls: The answer is no. But, you see, this is a good moment just to mention something else, namely, how we deal with questions. People ask questions for many reasons. Mostly, they ask questions in order to embarrass people, and to avoid making a statement. Actually each question, and this is a wonderful thing, each question contains its own answer. Try to make a statement out of any question, like the last question. If the questioner had made a statement he might have said something like "I am interested in Jungian psychotherapy. I am, also interested in knowing how do you compare with this?" In other words, we are shifted from his inquiry of a certain interest which he has and which is worthwhile developing. You see, I don't think any answered question will give you anything for the simple reason that nobody can stand truth if it is told to him. Truth can be tolerated only if you discover it yourself because then, the pride of discovery makes the truth palatable.

Chairman: All right, here's a gentleman who will take a chance though. He is going to ask you a question anyway.

Q: I'm very grateful, Dr. Perls, for your kindness and your great wisdom. You said, in the beginning of your lecture, that if those among us who understood Gestalt could understand Zen . . . I've never been able to understand either and I wish to get a little help. I am very guilty of falling under your last castigation, but I take the guilt.

Perls: Could you please use the word "resentful" instead of "guilty," and then repeat your statement?

Q: I don't resent you, I resent myself, I hope that will satisfy you.

Perls: Na, it doesn't satisfy me. Except if you could tell me, in detail, how you resent yourself. I can't visualize that.

Chairman: Doctor, it would take too long, he just told me all he hates about himself. But he still wants to know something about Zen and the relationship with Gestalt therapy.



Perls: Well, I give you a Zen answer. If you were hanging on a tree, by your teeth, over an abyss, and your hands are full and your feet are tied, and somebody asks you "How do you want to be saved?" What would you do?

Chairman: I think we heard this story a little differently about two weeks ago, doctor. It was two men hanging together and one said to the other, "How will we save ourselves?"

Q: I have two questions, Dr. Perls. You spoke of sympathy, empathy, and apathy, as one being in emotional rapport with another, in being in intellectual communication with another, and being completely indifferent to another. You also mentioned, at one time, that you had nothing to say. And when the audience laughed you said that you felt they were in sympathy with you, that you felt a warmth of human feeling there. Now, is there any connection between that and when an obese gentleman falls on the ice and the audience laughs. Is that sympathy, empathy, or apathy?

Perls; This is *schoden freude* (pitiful joy). There are as many different kinds of laughter as there are of crying. You see, crying is not always grief. You can cry by being moved, you can cry for joy, you can cry for a loss, and so on. The same with laughter. I don't agree with Nietzsche that to laugh is, always to be mischievous with good conscience. There are all possibilities, from a slight smile that is benevolent to the devilish laughter of a stage villain going "Ha, ha, ha, ha, (very raucous)." The ripple of laughter I experienced earlier, I experienced as something warm. Whether it was or not I cannot judge. I can only judge, and this is what I mean, by "my experiences," and this is the only thing I have to go by.

Q: You mentioned guilt, and my question relates to this concept of guilt. I understood from you that it is not what we think it is, in ordinary language, but it's some involved psychological, or psychiatric, process whereby it is actually reversed resentment. Well how about ordinary, everyday things that you can see in the criminal courts every day? For example, a man goes out and steals, he lives licentiously for weeks, comes home drunk, kills his wife or children. Isn't it normal, and natural, for him to feel a sense of guilt? Is there some reversed resentment there?

Perls: Yah. You see, if you read Dostoevsky, for instance, you notice that the more a person is a "saint," the more guilty he feels. And the more a person is a juvenile delinquent the less guilty he feels. I don't know whether you know this, that guilt is not related to doing, but to not doing, which means, actually, the resentment, that another can do it but that you cannot.

And . . .

Chairman: Not quite satisfied. He'd like to ask again.

Q: But I have spoken to clergymen, to priests, about that and they have told me where people have done real wrongs, they've killed, they've come back, and in their confessionals indicated tremendous guilt, where there was real guilt. I don't quite agree with you, doctor, if I may.

Perls: Well, I don't say that there isn't such a thing as a real guilt. I have been referring to our feeling of guilt. To the neurotic guilt, which is based essentially on thoughts, on feelings, on dreams, and so on. I don't say that a real debt, if you borrowed somewhere a thousand dollars, that this thousand dollars is not real. But if you imagined you borrowed a thousand dollars from somebody and then you go to this fellow and say, "I am so sorry I can't pay you back the thousand dollars, I feel so guilty about it." He doesn't quite understand what you are doing. In your example there may be a certain amount of guilt, but even there, there is a tremendous resentment, though in the form of projection. This is strictly for the psychiatrist. In other words, the resentment is projected. One feels that society resents one's deeds, and so on. In these cases it is not as simple as the ones I am talking about. I am referring to the every day "I feel guilty," "I shouldn't have done it," and so on. "I should have said this," instead of telling the other person, "You should have said this."



