

AFFECTIVE PROCESS IN
PSYCHOTHERAPY:
A GESTALT THERAPIST'S VIEW

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Emotions are the very language of the organism; they modify the basic excitement according to the situation that has to be met.

Fritz Perls (1973)

Introduction

Helping our clients integrate their affective experience into the whole of their lives is an essential aspect of the work of the Gestalt therapist. In this article I will describe a way of understanding emotion as the individual's guide to illuminating the situation in the field. Affect is not only a fundamental support in *orienting* the individual to the field, it also sets a tone for how the individual may optimally *respond* to the

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situation in the field. I view affect as an ongoing process, always changing in relation to changes in the self-in-field situation. The Gestalt therapist assists the client in delineating and supporting her ongoing affective process through dialogue and therapeutic contact. As the client's affective process becomes delineated and made more understandable, it becomes a support for living, acting as both signal and symbol pointing toward empowered action. Optimally, affective process becomes a gateway to increased awareness of what has hitherto been unconscious in the individual.

In health, as we mature, we make greater and greater sense of our emotional lives. We begin to make sense of our affective process in childhood through the empathic resonance and acceptance with which our parents and other caregivers meet us (Stolorow, Brandchaft and Atwood, 1987). Empathy on the part of the caregivers is essential to the child's affective development. Also essential is *contact*, so that the adult not only feels the child's reality by way of empathy but also responds to the child's feeling and behavior with the adult's own authentic and appropriate response.

In Gestalt therapy, empathy, acceptance and therapeutic contact are cornerstones of the therapist's stance. *Therapeutic Contact* may be thought of as fully hearing the *other* by way of empathy and responding to what is received with clinically appropriate authenticity on the part of the therapist. Increased empathy, self-acceptance and capacity for fulfilling contact on the part of the client are also important *outcomes* of effective Gestalt therapy. In genuinely mature functioning, affective process often becomes an object of contemplation, leading the individual into increasingly deeper knowledge of what has been unconscious in her, giving her the wisdom to make life-enhancing decisions, giving her empathy and compassion for others, and supporting her capacity for contact.

Affect serves a primarily interpersonal, social function, orienting the individual to the social environment, and in

maturity* orienting the individual to the subjective worlds of others. A hallmark of maturity is the capacity to process our affective states as signal and symbol orienting us to the field, and helping us to navigate our way toward wise and empowered action. As we mature, we find that the affective states we experience guide us toward understanding the affective states of others. Empathy can be understood as the affective state experienced in the "I" that orients us to the subjective world of the "Thou." An essential skill for the Gestalt therapist is to work empathetically with the affect that arises in the "I" of the therapist towards illuminating and making contact with the "Thou" of the client's subjective experience. Shared affective experience is both a method and a goal of Gestalt therapy. The mature therapist understands her own affective process and uses it as a support for facilitating therapeutic contact with the client. This therapeutic contact helps the client make sense of her own affective process as orientation to the field in which she exists and acts. As the client develops the mature connection between feeling and action she will tend to experience increased aliveness and empowerment. Deeper yet is therapeutic work that facilitates the client's capacity for mindfulness of her ongoing affective process as a way into compassionate understanding of the subjective experience of others, and as a doorway to increased awareness of her own unconscious mind.

In Healthy Functioning Affect Provides Orientation to the Field

In healthy functioning, emotion represents a kind of organismic knowledge about what is occurring in the field. In

* Fritz Perls defined maturing as the "transcendence from environmental support to self-support." (Perls, 1969 p. 28) However, I am using the term as a shorthand for the well integrated personality. I use the term "maturity" in reference to the person who has learned to accept and integrate a wide variety of aspects of the self.

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the context of maturity, emotion gives the individual a sense of how to respond with wisdom to events that are occurring in the field. The Field is where we live and what we are a part of (Yontef, 1993). The field is infinitely complex, demanding our attention in a great variety of ways. However, despite this potentially bewildering complexity, the individual can create a considerable degree of order and meaning. In health, *affect* is an indispensable support in generating meaningful foreground and background. Affect helps the individual ascertain who and what attract her – who and what carry the potential for engagement and fulfillment. Conversely, affect informs us as to what in life is toxic, destructive or fragmenting such that we need to move away from it. Because affect provides us with knowledge of the field and our well being in relation to the field, affect may be viewed in healthy functioning as the gateway to wise action (Basch, 1988).

The field never stands still. Everything is in process and change is ubiquitous. In my view, affect exists as a kind of internal barometer of events that are occurring in the field. As the situation changes, so does the emotional state of the individual. Affect is therefore most accurately described as an *ongoing process*. Or to put it differently, to be in a *process orientation* is to be attuned to one's ongoing emotional experience. Since the field is in constant change and since the individual is a part of the field, the individual's affective experience is quite fluid. Our emotional responses are constantly shifting in response to ongoing changes in the field, as well as changes in ourselves (Lewin, 1938). How are we to be present to all of this complexity, this ever changing present situation, and maintain a sense of equilibrium and responsiveness? Awareness of one's emotional process is a central aspect of how we achieve balance and make life enhancing choices of action.

The role of emotion is to inform the individual as to what attracts her – and conversely of course, what repels her. Emotion then serves as something like a compass, orienting us to the choices of action we may take by which we may find

satisfaction and fulfillment. Kepner (1987 p.141) relates feelings with action and contact — fear, for example, may lead to running away from a dangerous situation and ultimately to safety. Anger may lead to protection from intrusion and ultimately to greater empowerment. A heart feeling may lead to touch and loving contact. Sadness may lead to mourning of loss, tears and ultimately to emotional healing. When we restore the connection between emotion and action, we assist the client in living more fully, passionately and wisely.

Anger

The client may become stuck when anger and its accompanying fantasies are taken too literally. When there is a build up of new and old anger, a particularly debilitating polarity may develop in which the person is caught between *over-compliance* on the one hand (which involves the swallowing of anger), and *rage* with its accompanying violent fantasies and fear of loss of self-control on the other hand. It is important in these situations to assist our clients in developing a healthy relationship with their violent fantasies. We may teach our clients that violent fantasies exist as a kind archetypal symbol, pointing not to violent acting out, but to respectful, empowered, bounded, action. When the client learns to listen to her violent fantasies with awareness of the symbolic language of the unconscious, she makes strides toward becoming friendlier with her unconscious mind.

John for example, is a client who had been quite compliant in childhood and adulthood. His mother would withdraw her love and affection when he was less than fully obedient. In childhood he swallowed his rage at her and adapted to her by complying with her. He followed his parents life-script for him, becoming a successful attorney. Over time, rage built up in John. He married a very critical woman, whom he acquiesced to but secretly resented. He was stuck between over-compliance with his wife on the one hand and blinding rage at her on the other. He developed murderous fantasies toward her. He felt that he had two choices: either swallow his

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anger, or strike out with it. Being a sensitive, caring man, he chose not to be abusive with his anger, and saw no alternative other than to swallow the anger. Not surprisingly, he began to have affairs and to abuse alcohol while ostensibly submitting to his wife's over-control. He entered therapy after his wife discovered he was having an affair.

In the therapy we worked together on developing a healthy relationship with his anger. Expressing his violent fantasies was a first step. We worked on listening to his violent fantasy life as a symbolic expression of his situation, rather than as a literal call to violent action. We worked on listening to what the fantasies and anger were telling him in the symbolic language of the unconscious. This took us into memories of emotional abuse in his childhood and into control issues in his marriage. Over time, John developed the capacity to support his anger in new ways. He began setting limits with his wife. He began to listen to the fantasies symbolically and to use the anger as a signal that he needed to set limits with others in his relationships, particularly with his wife and parents. The anger stopped "eating him up" his physical health improved, and he began to experience the anger as an ally; alerting him to when and how he could take better care of himself in his relationships.

Emotion as Signal and Symbol Leading to Action

Obviously it is not the existence of emotion alone that leads us to wise, empowered action. After all, emotion exists in all people, from the most fragmented among us to the most deeply integrated. It is how we make room for and make sense of our emotional experience that makes the difference – in other words, it is *awareness* that brings meaning to our ongoing affective process. Awareness of one's affective process may be thought of as the capacity to hold emotion as both signal and symbol that informs action wisely. The capacity to healthfully enable affect to inform action constitutes the essence of self

awareness. Conversely, *neurotic functioning* may be thought of as the *incapacity* to hold affect as both a signal and symbol that serve to inform the self of its well-being in the field.

When we allow for awareness of emotional process, we find that emotion serves as both a *signal* and a *symbol*. Emotions *signal* us to the presence of the need to respond to an occurrence in the field. For example, the feeling of fear may serve as a life-saving *signal* to run from physical danger. In this situation, the signal quality of fear is all that need be responded to . . . one is signalled by the emotion of fear and one responds with life saving action such as running away. Sometimes emotions serve to give us more complex information about complex situations. For example, a feeling of anger may accompany a situation in which one's boundaries are being subtly intruded upon by another person in a complex social situation such as the workplace. In this situation, one must act with intelligence and often with caution. In this case, one must contain the anger as a signal to fight (for physical fighting in the workplace would likely be destructive to oneself and to the offending other) and work with the anger as a *symbol* for taking responsibility for setting limits in some appropriate way.*

* An experiment may be useful here such as creating a dialog with the anger. Although such an experiment may look to the casual observer like an invitation to "act out" (which Gestalt therapy has sometimes been criticized for), just the opposite is the case. We assist the client in making contact with the raw emotion of the anger and let its voice be heard so that we may assist the client toward *integrating* what it is that the emotion is saying to the person. Once the voice of the emotion has been heard, or in the language of this paper, the emotion has been understood symbolically, then the individual is in a better position to make conscious choices of action. It is axiomatic that feelings which are out of awareness will tend to get acted on less contactfully and possibly more destructively than feelings that are in awareness.

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Emotions become delineated when we connect *words* with them. The articulation of a feeling allows it to become defined, substantial and allows for the possibility of contact with the feeling. An unarticulated feeling might be thought of as a feeling with which one is confluent, but not in true contact with. Contact requires a degree of separateness. In treatment, we assist our clients in making contact with their various emotional states by assisting them with expressing the feeling that is current and helping them experience the feeling in a more well-defined and tangible way. Then we may go further with awareness and assist the client in making the feeling an object of contemplation (Saari pp.77-94).

As an object of contemplation, the feeling now becomes deeply symbolic, like a dream. We may ask the client to enter into the feeling now as an existential statement about her state of being. The feeling now becomes something like an arrow, pointing toward what is next (Polster p.88). Perhaps the arrow will point toward the memory of an unfinished situation clamoring for the attention of the person (Perls Hefferline and Goodman p.51). Perhaps the arrow will point toward the need to set a limit with someone at work. Perhaps the arrow will point toward the need to reach out to someone the individual feels attracted to. In any event, awareness of the emotion allows the individual to understand the emotion as an abstraction, a symbol that points towards growth and integration.

Emotions as Symbols Leading to Deeply Meaningful Living

As emotions become invested in not only as signals to action but as symbols that assist in deeply meaningful living, these symbols may take on surprising depth of significance. The person with strong libidinal drive may find that understood symbolically, her sexual desire also ignites in her a love of nature and the beauty that surrounds her. The person who feels sadness may find that her sense of loss draws her toward

reaching out to others in need. The person feeling anger may find that the anger leads her toward opposing oppressive forces in her community. Awareness is of course one of the foundations of Gestalt therapy. I find that allowing my clients the time and energy for "sitting with" emotion so as to allow awareness to deepen often reaps important benefits. As we allow emotional process to refract the light that shines at deeper levels of awareness, our clients may discover new meaning in their lives.

Affective Development

In this section I will be looking at the process of affective development. Michael Basch has delineated stages of affective development which I think are quite useful. In Basch's system, development does not occur so much in affect itself, but in the *awareness* the individual brings to bear to the affective process. That is, as we move through the stages of affective development, affect gives us increasing degrees of information about self and other. Empathic understanding is Basch's final stage of affective development – empathy being the capacity to sense from one's own emotional state, an understanding of another's subjective experience. This capacity for empathy corresponds I believe with a capacity of I-Thou relating – it is the capacity to imagine the subjective world of the other. In the left column (see Table on following page) is what I have abstracted from Basch's description of the stage. In the right column I have added to Basch's description by looking at the interpersonal or field aspect of the stage. These stages are not to be thought of rigidly as occurring at various age ranges. It is more useful to think of these stages somewhat abstractly as ways of processing emotion throughout the life cycle.

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Stages of Affective Development (adapted from Michael Franz Basch)

AFFECT

<i>General Description</i>	<i>Interpersonal Aspects</i>
A Bodily Sensation or autonomic response	Response to another in the form of a body response such as sexual excitement or fear.

FEELING

<i>General Description</i>	<i>Interpersonal Aspects</i>
"an involuntary basic affective reaction is related to a concept of the self. To be able to say 'I am angry' is to have abstracted the feeling."	A feeling elicited interpersonally such as sexual excitement or fear is accompanied with a degree of awareness. The feeling is related to a verbally or cognitively abstracted self concept such as "I am really attracted to him" or "I feel scared of him"

EMOTION

<i>General Description</i>	<i>Interpersonal Aspects</i>
Emotion occurs when "feeling states are joined with experience to give a personal meaning to complex concepts such as love, hate and happiness."	Now an integration occurs that there is excitement <i>and</i> fear which are related to the self. There is <i>awareness</i> that these feelings are connected to the self.

UNDERSTANDING

<i>General Description</i>	<i>Interpersonal Aspects</i>
Basch's final stage of affective development - this is the emotional connection that occurs in contact when another's words are not just taken at face value, but the deeper meanings of experience are shared.	Now there is further integration in which the feelings of excitement and fear shed light on both self and other. The feeling is now understood not only as a self concept but as something reflective of both self and other. The feeling now helps the self understand the experience of the other.

Zinker (1977 p.96) has suggested that experience follows this general cycle: ▸ withdrawal ▸ sensation ▸ awareness ▸ mobilization of energy ▸ action ▸ contact ▸ withdrawal. This is well known to Gestalt therapists as the Cycle of Experience or the Gestalt Formation Cycle. Basch's formulation helps us to understand the *awareness* phase of the Cycle of Experience. Sensation without awareness would be analogous to Basch's first stage of affective development: the stage that he calls "affect." As we mature, we become better able, in increasingly complex situations, to deepen the awareness portion of the Cycle of Experience. Basch's formulation helps us to understand that as awareness of feeling deepens, we gain the capacity for making more and more sense of our world through awareness of the feeling states we experience. Emotions, when processed with awareness at Basch's most developed level — the level he calls "understanding," lead to more fulfilling action and contact. Action will take into account what our emotions tells us about self and other. Contact will be richer because ongoing access to affect as a source of interpersonal knowledge will enhance the meeting between self and other.

Gestalt therapy has played a pioneering role in psychological theory that views emotion as informing action. Joseph Zinker for example connects emotion with action in the Cycle of Experience.* Fritz Perls (1973 p.23) discusses ". . . the force which basically energizes all our action. That force seems to be emotion." Perls (1969 p.65) also connects affect with action in his discussion of "responsibility" as the "ability to respond." This formulation connects affect with action in that we become aware of what we are feeling and what is occurring in the field. We then exercise choice over our actions which are responsive to our awareness.

* Although Zinker does not use the term "Emotion" in the cycle of experience, the stage of sensation with awareness clearly refers to emotion. In fact, a good definition of emotion is the stage in the cycle of experience in which sensation and awareness are integrated.

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Recently, several influential psychoanalytic thinkers have come a long way toward the Gestalt view. Basch (1988, pp.65-99) for example, speaks of emotion as the "Gateway to Action." Saari (1986 pp.77-94) offers an excellent discussion of affects as a source of knowledge. Saari (p.81) credits Freud with laying down the groundwork for a revolution in human thought that "involves an understanding that affect and cognition are not really opposites, that emotions are not the enemies of rationality, and that feelings are knowledge about the well being of the self." Saari goes on to say that "for affects to be maximally useful as knowledge, they must be utilized as both a signal and symbol." As noted earlier, utilization of affect as both signal and symbol is a primary support for awareness. With awareness, the individual listens to "what the emotion is telling" her (that is, abstracting, or viewing the emotion symbolically); in this way the emotion allows the individual to relate the feeling to what is occurring in the self and in the field. Thus, affective process as a source of knowledge serves to inform the individual's choice of action.

Resistance to Awareness of Affective Process

Let us consider how the individual, in the course of development, might learn to restrict awareness of her emotional responses. When, in the course of childhood, the individual is parented primarily through acceptance of the child's emerging needs and when necessary, through loving limit setting of unacceptable behavior, the child will expand her awareness of her affective process. That is, she will learn through experiences large and small, to accept her affective process as a source of knowledge and empowerment (Lichtenberg, 1978 p.58). If, on the other hand the caregivers parent primarily by way of shaming and frustration, the child will develop resistance to awareness of emotional response (Cole, 1993). Emotional responses can be extremely painful when they are experienced with the probability of being shamed and frustrated. Such pain leaves deep wounds that

interrupt awareness of affective process. If, for example, a child's desire to be held and soothed is met with rejection and shaming, then it will be necessary for the child to defend herself against such emotions that inform her of her need for touch and soothing. She thereby loses contact with her ongoing affective process, pushing it out of awareness so as to avoid the pain that needs give rise to in a shaming environment.

Gratification of a child's every stated desire, or permitting every action would undoubtedly be quite harmful for a child. However, within every stated desire or unacceptable action, if heard with empathic understanding by the parent, lies an emotional need that can be affirmed. For example, in anger at a sibling, a child may hit the sibling. While it is not acceptable to hit, the child need not be shamed. Instead, the child may be taught that the feeling was valid and good but that the action was not acceptable. If the feeling was anger that the sibling had teased her, then it is sensible to feel angry about that. Indeed, getting angry about being teased shows that the child has boundaries and self respect. The child is taught that her anger at the teasing tells her that she needs to find a way to set limits with the teasing sibling without hurting the sibling. Then the child can be taught alternatives to hitting such as using words or asking an adult for help. Here the parent is teaching the child to listen to her own feelings. Further, she is teaching the child to take responsibility for her actions. In optimal circumstances the parent will teach the child to listen to her feelings *and* be in charge of her behavior.

Much depends upon the degree of connection between the need in the child and the responsiveness in the caregiver to the perceived need. The care-giver need not and of course cannot meet every need and frustrating some needs at some times may be important learning - in the service of "holding a charge" for some situations (Joseph Zinker, personal communication). However, if the care-giver can recognize the need - even if it is inappropriate to meet the need - and reflect back loving acceptance of the need even while setting realistic limits

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– this parental attitude of acceptance will allow for the child's own acceptance of, and awareness of her own ongoing emotional process.

As mentioned earlier, Basch theorizes that empathic understanding is the most mature stage of affective development. This empathic understanding is necessary on the part of the adults in the child's care-giving surround in order to reflect back accurate material to the child. The child learns to accept, identify and delineate her emotional process through the empathic understanding of her emotional response by the care-givers.

Emotion as an Object of Contemplation in the Therapy Hour

In psychotherapy, when I support the client in using a feeling as an object of contemplation, I often find that the present situation is *yoked* with the patient's unfinished business by way of feeling. The therapist can shuttle between the present situation and a childhood feeling that is being evoked in the present situation. Emotion is the yoke that binds the current situation with unfinished business of the past. The following steps represent one way of working with affective process in the therapy hour: ▶ supporting the emergence of feeling ▶ exploring the feeling creatively ▶ shuttling to the unfinished business ▶ shuttling back to the present situation with new clarity. Below I give an example of how this process may look in a therapy session.

Supporting the Emergence of Feeling

The client is supported in making the feeling about the present situation foreground.

Possible questions for the therapist to ask

- ▶ what emotions do you feel as you tell me about this situation?

- ▶ “what do you feel in your body when you tell me about this?”

Example

David feels hopeless and self recriminating when his partner tells him that he is being harsh with their children. As we explore the situation with his children, it becomes clear that when they do not do as he says, he feels anxiety that leads him to a strong need to master the situation, and to sometimes be excessively strict. He is aware in this moment that his response is sometimes out of proportion to the situation.

Exploring the Feeling Creatively

Here the therapist supports fresh contact with the feeling in a variety of ways.

Possible approaches and questions for the therapist to ask

- ▶ verbal: “I’m interested in what you are feeling right now.”
- ▶ visualization: “what color is the feeling?”; “how big is the feeling?”; “does the feeling have a shape?”
- ▶ body sensation: “where do you experience the feeling in your body?”
- ▶ movement: “what does your fist want to do?”
- ▶ expressive art: “would you draw your feeling?”

Example

David now enters into the feeling itself as a body sensation. He feels tension in the shoulders, and a feeling of anger in his gut. The color of the feeling is black. Its motion would be a self protective one, but he is frozen.

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Shuttling to the Unfinished Business

If a situation from the past emerges, such as childhood shame or trauma, the situation is worked with toward affirming the client's affective response to the original situation.

Possible questions for the therapist to ask

- ▶ "Was this a feeling you experienced when you were a child?"
- ▶ "How old do you feel as you experience this feeling?"

Example

David now enters into a memory of being severely beaten by his mother as a young child. When he cries out for mercy, she beats him more. He cries to God for help. She tells him "God cannot help you now." Together we explore the feelings of rage and helplessness experienced in this trauma and sort through his identification with the aggressor (Lichtenberg, 1990 pp.9-32). His anger is supported and affirmed.

Shuttling Back to the Present Situation with New Clarity

Now we return to the present situation. The client is assisted and supported in making contact with feelings and thoughts concerning the present situation. The therapist helps the client sort through the differences and similarities between what *was* and what *is*. The therapist assists the client in finding what opportunities exist for empowered action in the present situation that may not have been supportable in the past.

Possible questions for the therapist to ask

- ▶ "How is this situation different from the childhood one?"

- ▶ “Do you notice any new possibilities in how you might respond to this situation?”

Example

David is now aware that the fear and loss of control he felt when he was being beaten as a child get activated when his children “act like children” and are disobedient. He becomes aware that he can take a time out and remind himself that there is nothing to fear in the present situation. He marvels at this simple yet profound truth: “I’ve treated children like creatures that needed to be shaped and molded in the past. I never before truly appreciated that children are human beings, and when you treat them with respect, they respond like human beings.”

Implications for Psychotherapy

Awareness of emotional process is an essential tool in living. Probably the most fundamental assistance we can offer our clients is to help them restore awareness of their emotional processes. Moreover, effective psychotherapy must also assist the client in reestablishing the link between emotion and action. In other words, the Gestalt therapist teaches the art of establishing awareness of affect as a road to empowered action. Why do we focus on emotion? Because emotion is the basic link between self and other. Emotion is the wisdom of the organism within the greater field. Emotion leads us toward enriching contact and away from toxicity in the environment. Let us now consider briefly how the Gestalt therapist may help to foster the client’s mature affective process.

Therapeutic contact and empathy are the therapist’s basic tools in facilitating the client’s maturing affective process. Empathic attunement may be viewed as a stage of affective

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development on the part of the *therapist*. It implies an I-Thou relation to the client. Empathic attunement does not imply, from a Gestalt perspective, an interpretive or confluent therapy. The therapist tunes into the client's emotional responses, and simultaneously into her own emotional responses. In Gestalt therapy, it is the *contact* between the therapist and client as opposed to interpretation that forms the basis of psychotherapy (Yontef, 1993 p.204). A dialogue between therapist and client develops. The therapist's empathic attunement in the moment and clinical judgement gained over time, are the therapist's tools in furthering the task of therapy: facilitating the client's growth and integration.

Because emotion is an ongoing interpersonal process, the therapeutic dialogue provides a rich opportunity for Here and Now exploration of the client's emotional experience. In Gestalt therapy our preference is to pay close attention and support what is emerging in the present moment of the therapeutic encounter. While sweeping interpretations may have intellectual validity, the Gestalt therapist often prefers to bracket off her interpretations in favor of facilitating the client's own awareness. Let me offer an example. A narcissistically wounded client makes a comment such as "I am feeling disregarded by you; when I walked out of the session last time, you dismissed me in a very perfunctory way." Now, an interpretive therapist might make the following response: "I think you were feeling shame in our earlier discussion about your father, and you projected his humiliation of you onto me." While the therapist's comment here may be accurate, it may not facilitate the client's present moment awareness. In Gestalt therapy, on the other hand, I believe we sometimes make the mistake of being responsive with "I statements" too quickly. I could imagine a Gestalt therapist responding to this client with an "I statement" such as "I feel a bit attacked by you right now." While that statement may be true for the therapist, it may not give the client sufficient support in validating her own emotional responses to the therapist. We Gestalt therapists, with our emphasis on equality, sometimes forget to pay

sufficient attention to the power differential between therapist and client. We sometimes forget that what feels to the therapist like a simple "I statement" may feel to the client like she has been rebuked and shamed. I am suggesting here that there is something in between an overly interpretive therapy and a therapy that is too reactive to the client.

My preference is generally to start with the assumption that the client's *feeling* is valid, even if my version of the truth is at odds with the client's version. Therefore, rather than interpreting, or offering a premature "I statement" which may unintentionally invalidate the client's feeling because I have underestimated the power differential between us, my preference is to assist the client in elaborating her feelings. I ask her how it was that I showed my indifference. I then look within myself to monitor my own feelings and actions. I try to find what is valid in what the client is saying. Perhaps I *was* dismissive of the client in some way. Therefore, I support her in expressing and elaborating her feelings. What usually happens next is that because the client is being validated and supported, she arrives at her own awareness of the emotional connections that gave rise to the apparent projection. The point is that I as therapist am more concerned with supporting the client's emotional process than I am in presenting my version of the "truth."

It could be argued that such an intervention is less than fully contactful, and that the Gestalt therapist should make contact with the client by confronting the client's projection. My response to that argument is that I as therapist must assess the quality of contact that is assimilable and potentially growth producing for the client at any given point in time. In supporting the client's feelings in this moment, I am providing support that will help the client make fuller contact in the next moment. I have found time and again, and particularly with clients who have been shamed and narcissistically wounded, that it is more important, particularly in the early phases of therapy, to support feelings, and to search for what is true in what the client presents rather than to respond with "I state-

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ments" that confront the client's viewpoint. I have also found that most clients when supported, will gain their own awareness about what they have projected onto a situation. Furthermore, the client's own awareness is often surprising to me and often quite different and more profound than the interpretation or "I statement" I might have made.

Erving Polster (1995 p.174) states that the quality of *empathy* in therapy may be enriched when the therapist empathizes with aspects of the client which may not have been sufficiently supported. For example the therapist might not only empathize with the client's foreground experience of depression, but might also empathize with the patient's loss of creativity and vitality. A corollary to this is to make *contact* with background aspects of the client; not just with what the client presents overtly. So, when I choose to support rather than confront the client's expression of his grievance with me, I hope to be making contact with the shamed self of the client that has been previously exploited and overpowered by others' points of view. By supporting my client's expression of anger at me, the shamed self of the client may be learning that the therapeutic dialogue is a safe place to come out.

Psychotherapy is at its heart about helping the client become clear about what she wants and needs; about honoring her own emotions. When we have this in mind, there is little need to fix the client, or to win her over to our point of view. Instead the focus is on assisting the client in honoring her own affective process and connecting that awareness with the choices she makes.

A Case Illustration: Richard

In psychotherapy I often listen for that which carries emotional charge; that which carries the potential for deepening awareness of affective process. Frequently it is the case that the issues the client is having difficulty with in the present moment are, at an emotional process level, a revisiting of

unfinished business from the past; very often from childhood experience. Richard is an Hispanic man who is a high school teacher and a pastor in the Lutheran Church. He is working on setting up a Spanish speaking ministry in his church, but his supervising pastor seems to be opposing his efforts. The supervisor, who is Anglo-American, has not been giving much support to Richard in his efforts. Richard, who tends towards intellectualizing, is talking in therapy with me in dispassionate, but slightly annoyed tones about his supervisor. He says that the supervisor is closed and has no desire to see Spanish speaking ministry happen. He says that "I have to be very careful with him so that he doesn't turn against me. That really pisses me off."

I ask Richard to make a part of what he just said to me an object of contemplation. I ask him sit with the following statement and see what feelings, thoughts or memories come up. The statement is "I need to be very careful with some people." Richard sits with this statement and with the anger he feels. Painful memories come back of his childhood in rural Texas in the 1950's. He remembers his family eating in the parking lot of restaurants as Anglo-Americans were allowed to eat in the dining room. He remembers his anger about that as a child and then he remembers his mother saying to him "never offend whites; when they turn on you they are vicious and won't let up on you until you are crushed." Tears start to flow now as Richard remembers the violence in his family — needing to be very careful with his abusive father. He remembers a racist school teacher who told him that he lacked intelligence. I decide to suggest an experiment: putting the school-teacher in an empty chair and expressing his feelings to him now as an adult. In so doing, Richard finds new empowerment in expressing his anger and outrage to the racist teacher. Richard tells this teacher about the teacher he, Richard, has become, and how wrong this teacher was to demean his Hispanic students. Richard, now in tears, tells about the great potential, intelligence and beauty he finds in all of his students, whatever their ethnicity. Now Richard has little else to

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say to this little man who treated him so badly in childhood, and the figure in the chair shifts from the school teacher to his supervising pastor Richard expresses his anger to the pastor in the empty chair. He finds in putting the supervising pastor in the empty chair, that the pastor is very distinct from the teacher, and that he, Richard, may not have communicated very effectively with his pastor.

In the weeks and months that followed, Richard made new and exciting contact with the supervising pastor. Richard became increasingly aware of his own avoidance of the pastor, and of being excessively careful with him. He developed a more direct style with the pastor, finding the self support to express his needs contactfully. Surprisingly, the pastor turned out to be moderately supportive of Richard's efforts and Richard found others, higher up in the church, who were very supportive. Richard did in fact keep the Spanish speaking ministry going with the help of others. In other arenas of his life as well, Richard has been finding increased self support in expressing his needs. He has become more friendly with his anger, using it now as a signal that he needs to pay attention to something occurring that demands his attention and that may possibly call for him to act. The anger has also become symbolic; when he marshals his awareness, he is able to understand what the anger is saying in the language of Emotional Process – informing him about where he stands in relation to the always shifting realities of his life.

The role that I played as therapist in this reawakening of Richard's emotional life was to allow, accept and help Richard articulate a wide range of affective states. Because Gestalt therapy gives me a great deal of permission to use myself creatively in the therapy session (Zinker, 1977 pp.3-20), I worked in a variety of ways to help Richard reawaken the connection with his emotional life. My presence was in the background, providing a safe container for previously unexplored memories and unarticulated feelings.

Conclusion

I would like to end this paper with a very brief comment and a wish. I agree with Laura Perls' assertion that "therapy is . . . is a political act." (Perls, 1992 p.19) When we truly honor our clients' affective process as therapists, it will not be long before our clients are drawn into empowerment and action in their lives. Emotion is a profoundly social phenomenon, and when embraced with awareness, draws each of us into action that may help us resolve not only our personal difficulties but may help empower us to confront social problems as well. My wish is that as our clients learn to honor their feelings and to empower their lives, that they will do their part in what is referred to in Hebrew as "tikkun ha-olam" which translates into English roughly as "repairing the world with love and justice."

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