

Gestalt Approach to Couple Therapy

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I. INTRODUCTION

A COUPLE IS COMPOSED of two people who make a serious commitment to each other over time, and who share important life tasks together: work, friendship, children, making a home, playing, loving, educating. Couples come to therapists with a history, the background of their separate relationships and with assumptions about love, marriage, family, child rearing, and sexuality. There is very little that is "standard" about couples. They can be roommates, close friends engaged in creative projects, or a man and a woman trying to build a life together.

My work with couples takes place in the context of their unique history, their comparative maturity, their apperceptive mass. Some couples are still playing house and are not yet psychologically married (not having disengaged from their respective families and unable to create a strong bond with each other), other couples have a long and heavily invested relationship which is undergoing change and needs assistance.

In this chapter, I want to examine psychotherapy with couples in the context of the development of love, the themes of fusion, differentiation and

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notions about complementarity and middle ground. I will also address myself to the couple as a system, a "third entity," and to the question of values held by Gestalt therapists working with couples.¹

II. GESTALT VIEW OF COUPLES

A. Love as Fusion

The original dream, the first dream, is of union with mother. It is a powerful dream/wish, probably the most fundamental—one which cannot be reduced into more basic components. It is the wish to be one with another. The union within oneself originates with the union with another.

Fusion is a very compelling, ecstatic experience. It is the first principle. "Falling in love" is a form of psychological alchemy, creating the golden ring out of opposing forces. It is the creation of a new self through fusion.

In the beginning of life this fusion is not "love" in the usual sense. This "need," this image, is a kind of undifferentiated longing—before the words are there—before one can utter "I love you" or "I long for something"—it is a physiological sensation without awareness. At that time—the time of physiological sensations—when the need for union is not met in some way, the infant, the child, is forever damaged.

It is only later that this enormous longing acquires words. These words are different in different cultures. Erich Fromm points out that some individuals, when they can't experience human union, turn to alcohol, drugs or gambling to experience it.² Different societies have developed different ways of meeting this unmet need. Therefore, love has different meanings at different times of one's life, at different stages of one's development. During adolescence people learn to make the words "I love you" signify this primordial feeling. At this point in an individual's development it is fueled by hormones. Later the sexual dimension is added to and complicates his/her existence. The words "I love you" are physiologically arresting, compelling, dizzying and upsetting. At the cognitive level it has, still, very general meaning:

I want you.
I can't live without you.
I am empty without you.
You are my sunshine.
You are beautiful.

Without you I am nothing.
You are the better part of me.

There is some recognition that somehow, without the other, one is not whole, one is not fully oneself. There is no recognition of the other as a whole, especially-designed being. Mostly, there is a reading into what the other is—the fantasy overpowers one's sense of curiosity about the actual other.

It is only much, much later in life when this profoundly basic need is partially met, and when the person becomes a person in his/her own right, that the "I love you" begins to mean:

I want to know you.
I want to make myself known to you.
I want to give you what you want.
(not the projection of what I want).
I want to sit and talk with you.
I want to learn about your ideas,
values and feelings.
I want to share with you—only when.
you care to hear—my ideas and feelings. One adult with another.

Union is like alchemy in putting things together and creating new form. In alchemy our ancestors put opposing metals together and tried to make "gold." This, in a sense, is what I think the golden ring of engagement or marriage is about.

There also is alchemy in the biology of heterosexuality. The male and female are different, and it is the mystery inherent in the difference of the other that is so compelling.

B. Need for Differentiation

But fusion in itself fails. If the fetus stays in the womb, it dies. If a young person stays at home with mother, s/he dies spiritually as well as in other ways.

What must follow is separation. And separation involves differentiation.

Differentiation means that as the couple begins to move away from fusion, they must develop their own selves. This is, in Jung's terms, "individuation." In Gestalt terms, this is boundary formation.

In Gestalt Theory, we say that the only way you can have adequate contact is to have adequate boundaries. You know you can't have contact

with mush. You can't have conflict with mush either. You must evolve from a psychologically homogenized blob into a differentiated bound organism with your own ideas, feelings, preferences, and buoyancies.

Then, when you get together out of your boundedness and your specialness, you have fire. Fire not only consumes, it illuminates.

1. Rhythm of Fusion and Separation

I conceive that what happens in a two-person system is a rhythm of fusion and separation. We touch each other at different places in our lives and in our rhythms of daily life. We also touch each other with different intensities. Sometimes we touch each other with ecstatic or rageful intensity, but most of the time we touch with just a nice bit of magnetism.

After this touching, we move away from one another. And then we come together again—it is this process of getting together and moving away that is the dynamic juice of being in a relationship.

The theme of fusion and of separation is a lifelong experience. It appears in the couples' life in different forms and at different times.

When couples first fall in love, they experience fusion. They are inseparable. They sit and stare into each other's eyes. They profess love for each other for ever and ever. They "can't live without each other." Later, as they proceed with the tasks of life, and as they grow more familiar with each other's ways, there is a slow and subtle process of separation. During this period, there is a greater recognition of differences and a return to the task of self-actualization. Fusion and differentiation occur at the same time as the individuals move toward and away from one another—in play, vacationing, making love, working together and rearing children.

Fusion is more difficult when children are born. It may be sublimated into the system which includes children and the family as a whole.

Separation is again experienced when children grow up and leave. Once again the couple is alone, hopefully as more mature and separate adults who choose to become deeply intimate with each other. Later, illness and death confront the couple with separation and with the fantasy of fusion with some eternal power beyond themselves in an experience of transcendence.

One is brought into the world only to give oneself away again and again.

2. Gaining an Awareness of Self

At the earliest level of development, the therapist works with the couple's ability to make contact without "falling into each other."

Each person must learn to differentiate his/her internal experience from the appearance, awareness and experiences of the other. So, we might ask each person to say sentences like: "I feel . . ." and "You look like . . .". Introjection, projection, and confluence are favorite resistances to contact at this level: "I feel like you look hungry", or "I feel tense and you look tense", or "You look angry with me."

Each person needs to gain an awareness of self as a separate entity different from awareness of the other. The therapist supports individual boundaries: "I feel tired and you look very alert right now." It is difficult to achieve differentiation with another when one is not aware of one's own internal differentiation: "One part of me feels tired and another part says I should finish writing this paper." The Gestalt therapist may wish to intersperse individual sessions with couple sessions to allow each partner an opportunity to work on awareness, differentiation and boundedness.

So at this early stage (longing for fusion), the couple learns how to respond to their own internal process and how, at the same time, to see and hear the other. On the surface, this would appear to be a simple task but, in actuality, it is quite difficult for many couples. The pursuit may require much time, effort and discipline. The diadic system is such a tempter for one's own projections!

Before the couple can experience the "we", the contact between them, they need to articulate the:

"I sense . . ."
 "I feel . . ."
 "I want . . ."
 "I don't want . . ."

Each says these things in turn and not reactively to the other. It is much later when internal vision becomes illuminated, that each can truly care about, and even validate the experience of the other.

3. Validating Differences

The need for asserting the "I" as between mother and child follows fusion. After the falling-in-love experience, each stands separately and is once again confronted by the self—its internal needs, conflicts and special talents. Each partner tailors his/her mode of functioning in the relationship, the partnership, to make it work.

Here, confluence-contact is replaced by conflict-contact. One cannot have differentiation without conflict. But many couples have been conditioned by

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Hollywood to feel that conflict means "we are no longer in love" or that "we are not really suited to each other" because they may never have witnessed resolution of conflicts—followed by expression of caring—in their own families of origin, the couple may be scared, fearing failure of the relationship. At this point, the Gestalt therapist needs to teach the couple how to fight cleanly and how to resolve or integrate differences in a way which enhances both and does not cause loss of esteem for either.

The therapist validates the experience of each and encourages both to respect the other's way of seeing a situation. Having supported both partners, s/he moves on to support the "we" in encouraging them to find a creative integration of their divergencies.

In my book, *Creative Process In Gestalt Therapy*, I have offered one model of such work—a model which requires one to hear the other, to own projections, and to move toward a compromise without losing face.³

The heat of the resolved conflict leaves the couple drawn to each other with renewed interest and even passion. Differentiation is followed by fusion. And so this rhythm goes on.

Some differences are not reconcilable and must be accepted as unreconcilable. One can love and respect one's partner and learn to accept the existential reality that not all problems are solvable. Just as Hollywood sold us a myth about love as fusion, the personal growth movement sold us the myth that all interpersonal problems are resolvable. This ethic forces some couples to fanatically negotiate and re-negotiate all differences until both are exhausted, experiencing shame, failure and disappointment in the relationship.

Differences are essential in a mature relationship. Differences keep the relationship alive.

C. COMPLEMENTARITY AND MIDDLE GROUND

1. Finding one's "better half"

Complementarity is the functional aspect of differentiation. It is how differentiation is lived out.

From a developmental point of view, one partner chooses another to complement the parts of oneself which are not in awareness, are not accepted, or are aesthetically repugnant. The qualities are seen in the other in a romanticized form. Two half-people come together to make one whole being to more effectively cope with the world.

The extrovert chooses the introvert as a symbolic gesture to one's inner world. The introvert chooses the extrovert so s/he can come closer to people, objects and events in the environment. The feeler moves toward the thinker, the concrete one moves toward the theorizer, and so on.

The complementary function is accepted and appreciated in the other as long as it is not experienced in oneself. Later, when that disowned quality begins to move to the surface in oneself, the partner's complementary behavior may be experienced with annoyance, anger, irritation and embarrassment. What was romanticized is now seen in its utmost crudity—the sociable one is seen as a "loudmouth," the introspective one is seen as "depressed."

2. Experimenting with Disowned Polarities

At this point, the Gestalt therapist can help each partner to experiment with each one's disowned polarity. When the introverted partner moves into the extroverted realm, the behavior of the other loses its "caricaturish" quality. Moreover, the one who was formerly "responsible" for dealing with the world is now able to recede into quiet self-introspection without worrying that external reality is not being dealt with adequately by the couple.

Some complementary modes—both characterological and stylistic—will remain as stable characteristics in a particular partner, no matter how much individual growth takes place. It is here that true (non-neurotic, non-projected) complementarity can work to lend variety and excitement to the couple's life.

The more fully each partner develops individually, the more one's own polarities are filled out and stretched, the more one can appreciate the "crazy" or idiosyncratic behavior of the other.

3. Appreciating the Ordinary

Life takes place in the middle, not at the extremes. Mostly, life is ordinary. It is only when we take the time to stop, look and reflect that the extraordinary aspects of life emerge. So it is with the life of couples. There are chores, work, the paying of bills, the errands, the phone calls, the morning showers, the meals, resting in one another's arms at the end of a long day.

Where complementarity stresses differences, middle ground acknowledges similarities. Whereas complementarity raises the voltage, the excitement of the couple's life, the middle ground provides a place to rest, a place where energy is even, rather than peaked—where energy levels are

synchronized. Whereas complementarity stimulates conflict, the middle ground is the repository of quiet confluence.

4. Balancing Complementarity and the Middle Ground

The couple's survival and growth are determined by a balance between complementarity and confluence. The figure of differences is only meaningful against a background of agreements, understandings, compromises and ordinary pleasures. The figure of confluence is viable only against a ground of color, difference, lively discussion, arguments and emotional explosions.

One could say that the survival index of a couple is some ratio between confluence and conflict, or between middle ground and complementarity.

When a couple comes into the office fighting, the Gestalt therapist must recognize that they didn't bother introducing him/her to their middle ground. To balance the work, as well as the couple's perception of themselves, the therapist may wish to explore their middle ground:

- How did you meet? (A magical question!)
- What did you like about each other?
- What are your common beliefs?
- What do you enjoy together when things are all right?

Answers to these questions remind the couple of their common ground, of their loyalty, devotion, friendship and hard work—or the therapist may readily discover that this couple's middle ground is not ground at all, but a sheet of thin ice. The therapist may find, in fact, they didn't use their best judgment in moving toward each other. Each may have denied feelings in himself/herself and lied to the other or that there is impoverished friendship. Finally the therapist may discover that loyalty and devotion are strangely unused feelings for this couple.

The therapist can judge in the here and now how much conflict this particular system can tolerate without breaking up. S/he may need to confront the couple with these questions—to ask them if they are willing to start building a basic ground of trust between them in order to sustain the kind of conflict they are engaged in.

5. One Couple's Middle Ground

I have wedged into Bill and Jean's middle ground, between their complementary modes (see table).

Bill and Jean are both Orthodox Jews. That is a very powerful factor. Jean left Bill once and went back to her mother and father. Her parents said

TABLE 11-1

BILL'S COMPLEMENTARY MODES	THE COUPLE'S MIDDLE GROUND	JEAN'S COMPLEMENTARY MODES
Concrete	Jewish Orthodoxy	Abstract
Thinking oriented	Family life includes extended family	Feeling-oriented
Logical	More focus on family than self	Intuitive
Extraverted	Marriage is for life	Introverted
Adventuresome	Emphasis on hard work	Reactive
Rebellious	Old-fashioned values of devotion, loyalty, sacrifice, stability, generosity	Naturally suspicious of new ideas
Need for power and control	Involvement in community	Need for being heard/ appreciated (passive reactive use of influence)
Projects	Conservatism	Introjects
Needs to be served	Love, care of their children	Needs to serve
Obvious	Importance of sexual contact and play	Mysterious

to her, "Go home. You have a child. You think you are going to leave him? You have to work it out. You are married and you will stay married."

As a result, Jean went home. The couple saw a therapist at Jewish Family Service, but they were not doing better. They went to someone else, and somebody else after that, and they still hung in there.

The point I want to make is that their orthodoxy is their middle ground. It keeps them together. Around sexuality they believe in purity, looking out for one another and paying attention to one another. Family life is important and it includes extended family. On Passover, if one has a poor brother in Chicago who cannot afford to come to the Seder, one pays the brother's airfare and makes sure he is at the Seder with the rest of the family. So, in part, this couple sticks together by maintaining family ties. Jean is the child of concentration camp parents. By a miracle, both parents survived. She cannot even conceive of the family not being together on a holiday. There is almost more of a focus on the family—they have two children—than on the individual selves.

Part of their middle is "marriage is for life." There is an emphasis on hard work as a value and they have other (what I call) old-fashioned values.

Bill, a consultant, travels all over the world. One time when I saw him alone I asked, "Do you ever . . . get tempted by women?" He turned pale and said, "When you're married, you don't fool around."

Other middle ground values for Jean and Bill are devotion, loyalty, sacrifice, stability, generosity and involvement in the community. In their case, involvement in the community means involvement in a synagogue.

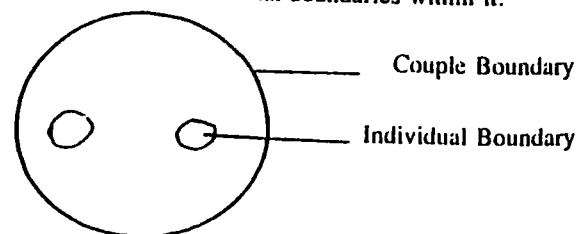
As I began analyzing Jean and Bill and other such couples, I realized that each of them has a specific middle range which keeps them together. To stay together as a system, there seem to be two kinds of ingredients: there is division of labor, or complementarity, and a thick middle system with a kind of balance that takes care of ordinary daily experience. It is quite exciting to study this. I'm selfish—I want to understand how my wife and I had survived in a couple for 28 years.

III. GESTALT PROCESS IN COUPLE THERAPY

A. Recognizing the Third Entity

Our greatest weakness as Gestalt therapists is our training in attending to the individual and his/her behavior in the therapeutic encounter. Even when we attend to the encounter quality of the therapeutic relationship, we tend to shy away from an analysis of this diad in its own right. We re-focus on the one who, after all, needs our help. And so, when we are faced by the couple, it is very difficult to abandon our tendency to see each person separately without factoring in the context of the other. It is, in fact, an extraordinary shift from the Gestalt of the one to the Gestalt of this new, two-headed organism.

The couple is a system, a Gestalt. It has a changing internal space within: the interaction between two people. The Gestalt therapist focuses on the space where they meet and not on their internal space. This system has a special boundary, different from the individual boundaries within it.



The boundary of the couple defines how they relate to the world around them. Some couple systems, for example, have very thin, overly permeable boundaries, allowing everyone to intrude into and disrupt their lives. On the other side are the couples who are too thickly bounded, living secret lives, isolated from others, not asking much of the world and not giving much to the world.

In order to see this system, this third and larger entity, the therapist must move away from the system enough to see both of them at once in her/his visual field, to watch their physical swaying and tilting—one in relation to the other—to listen to the orchestration of voices as they bounce off each other in anger or in tenderness, to attend to how much energy they create together—how much awareness together, how much movement together, how much contact together. The therapist's interventions are addressed, for the most part, to this third entity:

"You two are so cautious. I see you tippy-toeing on eggs around each other."

"When you start arguing logically, both of you close up shop."

"When you, Leonard, begin to talk about your work, you, Jenny, begin to stoop over and look down."

"You two remind me of a quiet lake before a storm."

"You are like a hippo mostly submerged in water with a little bird sitting on top of its mountainous back."

The balanced intervention stresses interactional characteristics. The metaphor does that also, but leaves room for other mysterious possibilities which the couple can explore. The metaphor is the most powerful tool of reminding the couple that they are one organism; that they individually contribute to the shape and functioning of this organism; that each cannot take whole responsibility for its survival or failure. (The notion of seeing a single spouse to solve a problem of marriage is not tenable with this model.)

B. The Empty Chair as Third Entity

The therapist cannot be a direct advocate for the system. S/he must evolve a creative method for advocacy within the couple. When couples are in crisis, polarization between them causes focus on individual needs, complaints and attacks on the other. There are monotonously repetitive attacks, counterattacks, rationalizations, justifications, and otherwise fruitless efforts to preserve one's own esteem in relation to the other.

The therapist finds himself muttering, "Who the hell is looking out for the house? If I do it, if I keep saying, 'Your marriage needs this and that,' then I am taking them off the hook around taking ownership of that entity."

In my work with couples, I teach both of them to use the empty chair as a place from which each can take a turn to speak on behalf of the relationship as an actual and separate entity. This method forces the couple to think in system terms, rather than in individual ego-protection terms.

The couple is instructed that when they get into an impasse, one is to move to the empty chair and speak for the third entity. If Charlie speaks from the empty chair, he must first address himself to the individual Charlie (the chair he just left) before speaking to Roberta. This prevents Charlie from using the third entity chair as a parent figure to give Roberta a sermon. He must give himself hell for his half of the couple's failures before turning to Roberta and telling her where she neglects the relationship.

The couple practices seeing how each contributes to the situation by speaking from the empty chair as a third entity. They become, in a sense, their own process observers and their own therapists.

Freed from the encumbrance of advocacy for or against the relationship, the Gestalt therapist can be more creative in the use of process observations, metaphors and the reporting of his/her own internal experience in the couple's presence. The therapist can share experiences, tell stories and use paradox to mobilize the system to see its own ongoing process with greater clarity.

C. Values

Implicit in this philosophy of Gestalt-systems treatment are values which are rarely articulated by the therapist—as if therapists are valueless. In fact, we do have values, not so much related to what a couple should do in a given situation, but rather how we can best relate to them as partners. Here is a sampling of these process-oriented Gestalt therapists' values:

- Respect the couple's system as is.
- Work in the present.
- Stay outside the couple's system (don't take sides or be trapped by the system's conceptualization of itself).
- Look for the contribution of each in any couple's action.
- Underline mutuality and complementarity of relationship: "You protect your wife in a way that inhibits her, and you elicit unnecessary protection from your husband with great skill."
- Do not refer to intrapsychic conflicts and individual motives.
- Support the couple sub-system when it is in danger of intrusion from other systems (kids, parents—boundaries too loose). Also, help loosen boundaries when the couple is in danger of isolation.
- Discourage looking at the "why" causes and effects and encourage the "what" and "how."
- If possible, focus on process and not content in your interventions.

Teach each to be an advocate for their relationship (to be the "watchdog" of the third entity).

Show appreciation for the things that the couple does well.

Show compassion for their pain, struggle, stuckness.

Share your own internal experience of being in their presence.

Support a healthy rhythm between contact and withdrawal (teach each to respect the boundaries of the other).

What do these process values imply to the couple? By practicing these process beliefs, what beliefs do we, the therapists, suggest to the couple? Here are some possibilities:

Look out for #3 (the third entity).

Appreciate each other's differences and use differences to enrich your own experience.

Respect the other's boundary (particular needs, privacy).

Don't try to change the other; change yourself; change how you relate.

Value fighting "clean"—stay with process and learn to tolerate frustration.

Appreciate your confluence (agreement, quiet times, doing the ordinary).

Develop the capacity for living with problems.

Be "mindful" of the other and act on your mindfulness.

Be gracious and compassionate (for example, learn to say "no" kindly).

Make demands and learn to accept "no."

As long as #3 is not threatened, support the other's need to satisfy growth needs out in the world.

Cultivate your sense of humor and sense of the philosophical—and don't forget to play.

When in trouble, protect your system from those who threaten its integrity and turn to those (i.e., therapist) who will help to change it safely (triangulation).

D. Cycle of Experience in Couple Therapy

We have discussed the development of a couple and the framework upon which couple therapy lies, now we turn to the specific model we use in couple work. The model for this process is based on The Gestalt Experience Cycle, described in detail in *Creative Process in Gestalt Therapy*. In this case, however, the cycle should be seen as an *interactive* event rather than an intrapsychic one, so the process of couple therapy moves more or less from sensation to awareness to energy and action, to contact, and finally to resolution, closure and withdrawal. This process works both at the level of an individual session as well as a way of examining the ongoing process of the entire therapeutic experience.

1. Sensation

In this early stage, couples tend to look at each other, often intensely, but not to see or hear each other. Each is rehearsing his/her own "tape,"

his/her own rebuttal. They are simply too busy making internal lists to actually use their senses externally. The therapist asks the couple to sit opposite each other so that they look at one another rather than at the therapist. The therapist encourages expression of what each partner sees in the other. This form slows down the process of rehearsed confrontation and forces the couple to settle down into the existential experience of being in this room together, sharing a dilemma together. (Sitting so that they *face* the therapist deflects the couple from observing their own ongoing process and reinforces an adversary system in which the therapist is expected to judge one of the partners.)

In this phase the therapist begins to encourage both partners to observe not only what the other is saying or feeling but also how their process is unfolding. S/he reinforces statements like "we seem to be sitting miles apart" or "both of us are holding our breath." The Gestalt therapy model for couples and families is clearly a process model. Clear observation of its own process teaches the couple most of what they need to learn about the malfunctions in their system (as well as what they do well together).

2. Awareness

Clear, strong sensations lead to clear, strong awareness between partners. Often partners feel things inside which are not expressed verbally: it is one thing to have an internal hunch, and it is another to say it directly to another. This is a bigger jump than most people realize. Sharing experiences with each other takes extra effort. Mutual awareness also requires taking time to listen to and process what the other is actually saying before responding. The Gestalt therapist makes sure that there is emphasis given to what is said by one of the partners by asking the other partner to repeat what was said before responding.

To care about another's experience requires a sense of curiosity about it, to ask the other what it was like to feel that way or to give more details, i.e., "You've been so quiet today—I wonder if you're worried about something you didn't share with me." The therapist reinforces this active process of being curious about the other. To want to know "what it's like for you" is one way of loving that person.

The couple is encouraged to express clearly what they want from each other and what they experience individually. It is impossible to satisfy the partner's need or to understand his/her feelings when these feelings and desires are not expressed. Even people who love each other can't read each other's minds.

The most common resistances at this level of process are introjection and projection. Sonia Nevis⁴ points out that these resistances should be seen at a systems level rather than intrapsychically: "Introjection can be seen in a system when there is a force-feeder (one who expects the "food" of his/her opinions or information to be swallowed as given), and when there is a swallower (one who does not chew what is given and spit out what is not wanted), and when others who are present do not interfere. Projection also requires two people: one who gives little information and deflects and discourages questions, and another person who is willing to guess and fill in the gaps . . ." The therapist's task is to point out these resistances to contact and each partner's role in making that miscommunication happen.

It is in this stage of work that the couple learns to negotiate mutually agreed upon ideas, goals, perceptions and awarenesses of what is going askew between them. The therapist reinforces their process of creating cognitive clarity and not getting stuck in repeated cycles of mutual blaming.

Therapist interventions are strong, simply-stated and always grounded in the process of the ongoing session. Interventions are sparse (sparceness delivers punch) and are generally addressed to the couple as a system.

3. Energy and Action

Having arrived at clear, mutually agreed upon ideas about their dilemma, the couple begins to experience energy to do something about their mutual needs. Mostly, they want to do something later, at home, not in the therapeutic situation. The Gestalt therapist will often translate their ideas and transform their energy into an event, perhaps an experiment which will give the couple a sense of "having done it," of having acted upon what needed to be expressed in the lively moment. (The therapist may also invite the couple to carry out other experiments in the safety and privacy of their own home. Unfortunately, many couples resist by not carrying out these experiments.) At the culmination of a successful experiment, the couple can congratulate each other for "breaking through" something which, until that moment, felt like an awful stuckness, a morass of unpleasantness.

In this stage of the session (or therapy) the Gestalt therapist makes sure that the energy exchange is not uneven in the system, that one partner doesn't overwhelm the other (with the other allowing him/herself to be overwhelmed). Confluence occurs when one "gives into" the other's pushing for the "sake of peace," or to avoid the painful process of pushing right back and making sure one's ideas are taken into account. The therapist also watches for the most common resistance to mutual contact in this phase: retroflection. The couple, fearing smoke and fire, colludes to turn energy

inside themselves rather than expressing it toward each other. The therapist will notice signs of physical discomfort and will teach the couple how to express their energy (often anger) in a safe, unthreatening way in the therapy room. Couples who retroflect tend to draw tight boundaries around their (individual) selves or around themselves as a total system: "We can do this alone . . . we don't need other people's help," they say. They turn out to be isolated couples, distanced from the support of their community. The therapist may encourage such a couple to ask for help from friends whom they respect and trust (or to at least share their feelings with other couples).

4. Contact

Active use of energy and experimentation makes the couple feel closer and good about one another. Even good expression of anger can lead to a strong sense of contact. There is sharing about what happened, what seemed to be difficult and how each partner contributed to the creative resolution. The therapist makes sure that the couple doesn't jump into premature self-congratulation (confluence), avoiding the chewing on something that both consider "unpleasant" or "shameful" to express. Having ascertained that genuine contact is taking place, the therapist reinforces the couple's success and their ability to talk about it: "We didn't call each other names this time" or "It was nice not to get stuck in our sulking."

5. Resolution, closure and withdrawal

Some couples can't let go of processing their experience. Here, the therapist keeps the couple from mulling over again and again how it went wrong or what was done differently. There is encouragement to move on. In addition, the therapist emphasizes the unique complementary style in which each partner contributed to the process of the work. At this stage individual boundaries are encouraged.

As the withdrawal stage approaches, the therapist teaches the couple that silence in this context is a form of groundedness. There is both a sense of mutual peace and a slow building of energy for future use. In the culmination of the cycle, the therapist also emphasizes the importance of each partner's independence and self-support.

IV. CONCLUSION

The above process is true (ideally) of each session, as well as of the therapeutic process on a grander scale. Over a period of months, couples

tend to get stuck in awareness when therapy starts. There is a tendency to talk about, rather than doing something active in the session. When the couple is filled with their thinking and clarifying, the therapist coaxes them to more actively explore their process in the therapy situation. Thus, middle sessions are imbued with energy and experimentation. Ending sessions are characterized by good, healthy contact; resolutions come more quickly because there is more clarity about what is happening, each partner taking responsibility for his/her own experience. Intellectual clarity leads the couple to a sense of their own competence, as well as to confidence in creating their own problem-solving experiments. In the very last sessions, the couple begins to withdraw from the therapist, to wean themselves from the therapeutic situation. They feel more sure of their own skills and a greater sense of independence from the therapist. The therapist's task at this juncture is to give the couple permission to "go home" with his/her blessing.

What does the therapist hope to accomplish with his/her process interventions? If not to save the marriage, is it to help the couple part? No, not really. We assume that in their deepest wisdom the partners must know what is best for them. For myself, I hope to teach the couple:

- *How to rise above themselves to see what their process looks like—to observe themselves.
- *How to start, develop and complete difficult situations.
- *How to make good contact and be aware of contact disruptions.
- *How to withdraw and rest, rather than clinging to unfinished bits and pieces of circumstances.
- *How to support each other without losing themselves.
- *How to turn to others for nourishment and, also, to give it.
- *How to enhance the continuing growth of each without losing the precious commodity of intimacy.

These are some of my thoughts on Gestalt work with couples. The most important learnings have been to not get hooked by individual arguments, but to see the couple as a system struggling for resolution. When I find myself becoming biased toward one partner, I invite another therapist to co-lead the couple sessions with me. Generally, the spouse I dislike turns out to have some behavior which I cannot tolerate in myself.

The couple is very rewarding to work with because they generate much energy and don't seem to drain the therapist. This is especially so if the therapist manages to maintain his/her own boundary and does not merge with the system.

NOTES

1. These formulations have been heavily influenced by my colleagues at The Gestalt Institute of Cleveland. I am particularly indebted to Ed and Sonia Nevis and Wesley Jackson.
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3. Zinker, Joseph. *Creative Process in Gestalt Therapy*. NY: Brunner/Mazel, Inc., 1977.
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