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**GESTALT
COUNSELLING**

IN
Action

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6 Awareness and the Initial Phases of the Counselling Process

Tenno, having passed his apprenticeship, had become a teacher. One rainy day wearing wooden clogs and carrying an umbrella he went to visit Nan-in. On greeting him, Nan-in said: 'I suppose you left your wooden clogs in the vestibule. I want to know if your umbrella is on the left or the right side of the clogs.'

Tenno was confused and could give no instant answer. He realised that he was not yet able to carry his Zen (awareness) every minute of the day. He subsequently became Nan-in's pupil and studied a further six years towards enlightenment. (Reps, 1971: 43)

AWARENESS of Discomfort — Dealing with the Presenting Problems

It is almost always difficult to isolate beginnings in human processes. Most events seem to be linked with events that went before which appear to be connected with the events that preceded those. Gestalt is particularly sensitive to this systemic interrelatedness as a result of the influence of the field theory of Kurt Lewin (1952). To ask clients to begin at the beginning may be an impossible task. Whenever they (or we as counsellors) choose to begin is a beginning itself — even when an up-to-the-minute account on the current state of the marital relationship is the initial exchange. However we punctuate the temporal complexity of human lives, beginnings are often where awareness is freshest, most poignant and unprejudiced. It's the first impression of warmth in the eyes as the person walks in that can form the basis of trust in the relationship. It is the defensive holding pattern in the chest that comes to awareness most sharply, often before it has been analysed, understood or interpreted. Certainly we can acknowledge that the decisions which lead to a person becoming aware that he or she wants to seek counselling are very complex, and have probably been made and remade many times.

In our culture it is an accepted part of education that children be taught how to brush their teeth, keep their bodies clean and many get detailed instruction in the area of sexual relationships. What the school curriculum frequently neglects is issues of emotional education such as how to cope with failure or how to deal with feelings of anger, fear and sadness. It is not culturally expected that children should 'naturally'

know how to prevent tooth decay. It is expected that they would 'naturally' know how to prevent the decay of their curiosity, spontaneity and spirit. People who see the dentist regularly are held up as examples. People who 'break down and cry' are looked upon as 'sissies' or weaklings. There is still a social stigma attached to taking emotional care of yourself or to seeking information about how people function as emotional beings. So a certain amount of deflection (particularly awareness of sexual and emotional sensations) is culturally conditioned and even rewarded, whereas awareness (of pain, of fear) can be seen as weakness.

Wendy had a basic feeling of inadequacy and personal unacceptability ever since she was born to a teenage mother whose social standing and career potentials were destroyed as a result of her pregnancy. Wendy was used to being told that she was unwanted, 'nearly ruined her mother's womb' and generally had to feel grateful for not being aborted. Mother dealt with her ambivalent feelings towards Wendy with resentment, escalating demands and incessant fault-finding.

Wendy sought counselling only after many attempts at 'self-help' had failed. A kindly teacher, women's magazines, and desperate attempts at 'self-improvement' had already failed many times. Hers was a problem of long-standing and chronic low self-esteem, depriving her life of light and joy and the spontaneity which could have been hers. Up to that point she had seen need for help as a further sign of her weakness and inadequacy. When Wendy actually asked for counselling it represented not an act of hope for her, but an act of despair — giving up on herself.

Richard, a forty-year old accountant, sought counselling when his marriage of ten years broke up and he went into a severe depression which was accompanied by recurrent migraines. His wife was not clear why she finally found their marriage intolerable, but he was devastated by her accusations of his emotional absence and lack of intimacy. He even had some difficulty understanding what she meant. He had not been unhappy with the marriage, believed they had a good relationship and was not aware of any ongoing or incipient problem. As a very young boy he had been sent to boarding school, encouraged to 'behave like a man' and developed an appropriate social persona while his 'inner child' got lost. The awareness of discomfort for him came to his attention following the marital crisis, whereas for Wendy it always appeared to be part of her foreground.

Frederika's decision to come into counselling was not prompted by a long-standing dissatisfaction or a particular crisis, but by a growing awareness of a hunger to explore herself more fully and to develop her creativity and potential in ways which she had not so far done. She was

attracted to Gestalt as a method because of its emphasis on creativity and spontaneity, its compatibility with her basically humanistic philosophy and also because it appeared to be fun and exciting. Several friends of hers appeared to have been 'freed' from many restrictions and inhibitions through counselling. In particular a friend who was a painter developed a new more vibrant style of painting, as well as increased enjoyment of the creative process in herself. In Frederika's case she is entering counselling as a kind of 'gratuitous creative act', creating a new situation for herself in order to encourage and facilitate her own growth. Gestalt is not only about problems or dysfunctions, it is also about a celebration of life.

Beginnings — Forming the Counselling Relationship

Each Gestaltist, as well as each client, will have particular preferences for beginning counselling. Some people rush into the relationship assuming intimacy and connectedness long before it has been established in a mutual way. Before true contact (which is not based on wholesale projection of past relationships or fantasised relationships) between two separate individuals can occur, some dialogue and some testing may be realistically necessary. It may be unwise or dangerous to 'trust' a counsellor (or anyone else such as a gynaecologist or lawyer) without first establishing their qualifications and professional standing.

For some people it has become a chronic and predictable pattern that they withhold themselves in the early stages of a relationship. For them the beginnings of the counselling relationship may be inordinately protracted. Other clients rush into counselling in the same impulsive way they rush into relationships — without due care or protection for themselves. As a counsellor, the Gestaltist who habitually rushes in or habitually holds back is also operating from conditioned patterns and previous experiences, not allowing himself or herself to be open to the vivid newness of this encounter with this person.

Each Gestaltist will begin the counselling process uniquely anew with each client. What is useful and reassuring for one client (e.g. history-taking) can be unresponsive and destructive to another (e.g. one who needs/wants to unburden himself of a painful confession of having abused his daughter many years ago).

Here follows an example of how Jim Simkin (a celebrated Gestaltist) begins a therapeutic relationship with an experienced client:

Good evening. I'd like to start with a few sentences about contract and then suggest an exercise. I believe that there are no 'shoulds' in Gestalt therapy. What you do is what you do. What I do is what I do. I do have a preference. I prefer that you be straight with me. *Please* remember, this is a preference, not a should. If you feel that you *should* honour my preference

then that's *your* should! When I ask you, 'Where are you?' my preference is that you tell me — or tell me that you're not willing to tell me. Then our transaction is straight. Any time that you want to know where I am, please ask me. I will either tell you, or tell you that I am unwilling to tell you — so that our transaction will be straight. (Simkin, 1976: 18-19) .

It is impossible to describe typical ways in which a Gestaltist would initiate the counselling relationship since there can be no prescription for existential meeting. Perhaps it is most important to start where the client is, to accept, value and respect the client's phenomenological truth. This means that his description or his assessment of his situation is taken for real, and the counsellor does not assume that there is another deeper truth or that the presenting problem covers the 'genuine problem'. This requires considerable discipline in the phenomenological attitude, particularly if the counsellor has had training which encouraged the model of an expert interpreter who understood more about the client's psyche than the client ever could.

The counsellor is more likely to model through his or her own behaviour a willingness, interest and serious commitment to engaging with the client as a collaborator in a mutual partnership of adventure. Even in the initial interview there is bound to be some combination of intervention or presence which combines that which is discomfortingly novel with what is reassuringly familiar. In this way the client can experience from the very beginning the stylistic range of the subsequent work and should have enough information by the end of the initial session to make a clear decision about the likely nature of the relationship with that particular counsellor. Client and counsellor will have a sense of whether their senses of humour match or collide, whether there is enough potential for trust and whether there is enough scope for surprise.

People tend to re-create their primary relational patterns with significant others, particularly counsellors, and the initiation of these can take a wide variety of forms. For example, there is often an expectation on the counsellor to somehow collude with or support a self-representation of powerlessness. This reflects the early impotence many people experienced as infants. It is crucial to Gestalt that clients understand even from the very beginning that they are now, as adults, responsible for the outcome of their work in counselling and ultimately that they are responsible for the quality of their lives. The artistry of the counsellor lies in finding the balance in every fresh moment between accepting the client's self-definition and presenting him with stimulation to an ever-widening range of choices. Indeed if the self is conceptualised as an ever re-creating here-and-now system of boundary contacts, personality can be said to be a description of one's current limitations and 'cure' the liberation of all potentials. Of course,

beginnings are never over. After every session, or after every piece of work, there will be new beginnings, perhaps even new kinds of relationship with the counsellor.

Typical Issues of the Initial (Awareness) Phase

Trust/Distrust

The very idea that predictable issues may arise in some kind of sequence in the counselling process is in some way antithetical to the Gestalt approach. Such a structure may be experienced as an imposition and impediment to the spontaneous and (probably) atypical unfolding of each new healing partnership between counsellor and client. Keeping this danger in mind, however, can allow the confident Gestaltist to pay attention to the shifting figure/ground of idiosyncrasy and generality, of total uniqueness and commonly found human patterns.

Trust is that state of being during which people believe that their needs can be met without injury by others or their environment. Distrust is the conviction that the environment will be neither nourishing nor benign. This polarity is probably the most crucial in initiating and establishing a helping relationship. For clients who were abused and neglected in infancy or childhood the gift of trust can in itself already be a sign of lasting change to this damage. This is a biological necessity in terms of establishing firm support for the exploration which must apply to most people. So the beginning phases of counselling can be enormously helpful in establishing the trust which was absent during early development.

Helping and Being Helped

Another polarity which is highlighted in the counselling engagement is that of helping and being helped. On the one hand the Gestaltist encourages his clients to take full responsibility for their own feelings, life choices and behaviours. On the other hand it is necessary for clients to 'let the helper in' — to allow the counsellor to be helpful. For many people at this stage a focus seems to be the task of finding a balance between accepting help without collapsing and maintaining their autonomy in an interdependent relationship.

The spectrum of practice amongst Gestalt practitioners is exceptionally wide. In keeping with our orientation, based on creativity as fulcrum, the practice of any one Gestaltist may vary enormously from one situation to the next. There are limitations to static representation of such richness and diversity. It is true that most Gestaltists would make some form of contract with the client. There also seems to be a phase of learning how to be a client as much as learning how to get the

best out of the counsellor. For the counsellor too these issues are alive in the current experience — 'can I allow this person to touch me?', 'will my engagement with this person change me?', 'what do I risk in forming this relationship with a client?' The fear of dependency and the wish for dependency is also very much a part of this initial phase. Of course this may recur, particularly at times when there is a deepening of the client's exploration or greater risks are being attempted at any other stage.

Another frequent polarity of motivation lies between the client's fear of being taken over by the beliefs and values of the counsellor on the one hand, and their wish for 'a system of beliefs' (whether psychoanalytic or Gestalt) which will provide them with security and certainty against the vicissitudes of life. People may fear losing their identity by joining an exclusive 'Gestalt club'. On the other hand they may long for a certain and reliable system of living that would be useful for all situations and also across all times. Such contrasting motivations emerge in all systems of counselling. Of course, ultimately the task is to find the true self which can both join and be independent, belong and separate, criticise and value. This necessitates the clarification of boundaries.

Boundaries and Identity

For people at the beginning of the kind of growth process that counselling can be, there is often confusion about boundaries between themselves and other people, themselves and their environment and within their bodies. A common example is Debbie, who doesn't know where in her body she actually experiences hunger. She eats when the clock says it's time, and when she is angry or tired or lonely. She complains that she has not experienced genuine hunger sensations for many years. To the extent that people are alienated from their physical selves they will interpret sensations falsely. This leads, as in Debbie's case, to anxiety being mislabelled as hunger. Clients then eat to still a displaced 'hunger' instead of attending to their anxiety but, as they do this, they become more alienated from their natural hunger and satiation cycles. Discovering where in her body she senses and experiences hunger pangs will make it more likely that Debbie will be able to experience her basic psychological and physiological needs and follow each one through the experience cycle to satisfaction and completion. One woman felt her 'stomach being very low down in her abdominal cavity'. Anatomically she was pointing to her lower intestines. She had believed this to be biologically accurate in an experiential way even though she had done biology at school and intellectually knew other facts to the contrary. This anatomical confusion reflected her confused awareness of her internal organs and hunger-satiation cycles.

Other boundaries that come into play are those of confidentiality and relationships with people in other social systems of the client such as their spouses, families and employers. All these people in the social system may in varying ways be simultaneously or alternately supporting the initiation of this special journey and (at least at some level) wishing to sabotage it. Perhaps they may feel threatened at their loved one's attempts at self-support and independence. For example, a mother rings the counselling centre in great distress about her twenty-four-year-old daughter who appears to have lost motivation for work or study, mopes around the house and suffers from anxiety, loneliness and despair. The daughter had had a relationship, had become pregnant, on mother's advice had an abortion and ended her relationship with her boyfriend. Mother complains that the daughter also believes that people talk about her behind her back.

The counsellor pointed out that by mother trying to make the appointment and establish a counselling relationship without the daughter's consent or participation, this is in fact true. The daughter's suspicions are indeed based on facts — but mother does not acknowledge this. Mother is used as the girl's confidante but she is also the person whom the daughter most profoundly resents and blames for the difficulty of her own life. Spouses are also well known for being in this ambivalent relationship at the start of counselling. They may be very supportive and want the person to engage in a change process, but as one of them said 'as long as she doesn't change in ways that I don't like.'

Since the Gestalt approach places such high values on one's responsibility for oneself, counsellors will only under exceptional circumstances deal with other members of the family, unless specifically requested to do so, for example in family therapy. Perls (1969) shows the process of maturation as moving away from environmental support towards self-support. The person leaves and discovers firsthand for himself, instead of accepting the authority of others, and no longer depends on the praise or approval of others for his self-esteem.

Expectations and Fears

Much of the initial phases of the counselling process can be seen as a working-through of the client's expectation and fears. The polarity which can be most useful in conceptualising these parameters is that of abandonment or engulfment. For most people the earliest relationship with their primary caretaker (self/other boundary dynamic) can be characterised more by the one than by the other. In other words, baby and mother dyads can be described as having either boundaries which are too impermeable or boundaries which are too permeable. In the healthy mother/infant relationship there will be a rhythmic fluctuation

depending on the infant's most urgent need at the time following the Gestalt cycle phases which we have already discussed. Unfortunately, because most caretakers have experienced some distortion of this healthy process in their own early experiences, they may pass on the early distortions or vigorously implement the opposite of what they received. For example, as a baby, Layla experienced her mother as engulfing her. Mother allowed her own needs to disappear while servicing Layla's every whim. Mother had no separate identity and lived through Layla's achievements, Layla's moods and her personality. Any independent activity on Layla's part, such as going to nursery school, mother experienced as a sad separation which confronted her over and over again with the emptiness of her own life. As a grown-up person, Layla developed all the features and problems of what has been described (Masterson, 1976) as borderline personality. When Layla in turn had a child she felt the enormous compulsion to repeat her mother's pattern with the baby by making the baby the centre of her universe. Through counselling Layla had achieved enough insight and understanding about how her mother's confluence had damaged her. So she took an opposite position with her baby daughter, avoiding holding her, creating long separations and generally guarding against the enmeshment in such an extreme form that the baby experienced emotional abandonment.

These opposite states of engulfment on the one hand and abandonment on the other have been described by Resnick (1987) in terms of confluence and isolation.

The earliest fears and expectations in the counselling relationship are likely to mirror the earliest fears and expectations of a person's life. The person whose early primary mode was confluence may tend to fear abandonment, for example that the counsellor may move to another city before completing the work. The person whose earliest primary mode was isolation, may tend to fear engulfment, for example that he or she may not be allowed to disagree or develop independently of the counsellor. Sometimes people may appear to be warding off engulfment as a means of avoiding experiencing the pain of their earliest abandonment. Sometimes people may appear to be warding off abandonment as a means of avoiding experiencing the violation of their earliest engulfment. The sensitive counsellor will be very alert to these characteristic relational modes and change his or her ways of working with a client, depending on how these polarities of abandonment or engulfment manifest in the counselling process.

Examples of Experiments

The techniques which follow can be viewed as also referring to ways and means of dealing with deflection — the boundary disturbance

which is being used in this book to highlight the awareness phase of the Gestalt cycle as it may manifest itself in the counselling process.

Learning and Practising the Awareness Continuum

One of the most important skills that a Gestalt client can acquire is to follow his or her own 'awareness continuum'. It may appear a very simple process, yet in many ways it may take a lifetime to learn. Awareness has been defined and described earlier, in Chapter 3. The awareness continuum in this context is meant to refer to the ever-changing consciousness of moment-by-moment changes within oneself and in the environment. The Zen story at the beginning of this chapter illustrates the kind of failure of awareness which impedes full and effective functioning. Practice of the awareness continuum is a kind of training in applied phenomenology; an attempt to concentrate without judgement or labelling on every new figure which becomes of interest without preconception or expectation. Frequently human beings engage habitually in behaviours, attitudes and feelings stripped of conscious awareness. People eat, make love, go to work, etc. However, in all important ways they are unconscious or unaware of their here-and-now experiences, their recall is barren and their attention everywhere else but on the vividness of their life's every passing moment. The awareness continuum is particularly designed to heal this lack of 'mindfulness' and to restore richness and vitality to living.

It is emphatically not the same as introspection, because introspection splits the person into observer and observed. The technique of awareness means to maintain the sense of your actual existence from moment to moment. Practising the awareness cycle means excluding nothing — wishes, thoughts, bodily feelings, sensations from the environment, temperature changes, voluntary and involuntary actions and all these before judging or labelling or categorising. It is very similar to the Zen practice of 'mindfulness' and the way to get into this technique is to start verbalising without exception to every experience 'now I am aware . . . '.

It is considered to be different from psychoanalytic free association in that it specifically includes all physical, mental, sensory, emotional or verbal experiences which form part of the unitary flow of experience. The Gestalt goal is to extend and increase integrated functioning of the body/mind self and to do it in awareness in the present. This includes bringing into conscious awareness what may otherwise remain un-conscious or out of awareness.

Using the Language of Responsibility

Gestalt is based on a fundamental assumption that people are responsible for their own feelings and behaviour as well as a

philosophical commitment to the existential position which stresses the person's inalienable self-direction. This emphasis is carried through in the apparently small details of people's use of language. Perls, like Goldstein, emphasised that carelessness in speaking results in limitations of orientation and of action, and encouraged appreciation for the power of the word. Our choice of words and sentence construction is reporting and representing our inner world. In addition, from a systemic point of view it is also forming and influencing our current experiences and future attitudes. The way we speak is very often a highly accurate reflection of our inner processes and only rarely if ever coincidental. Our verbalisations mirror ourselves. Even apparent mistakes, as Freud pointed out, often bring to consciousness aspects to which we may otherwise not have paid attention.

The word 'personality' is derived from a root 'sonar' which means sound. So people who use the Gestalt approach to counselling also pay finely tuned attention to the quality and expressiveness or inhibition of people's natural sounds. In our use of language we can deny or assume responsibility and reinforce a position of powerlessness or self-direction from moment to moment. There is a world of difference between the subjective experience of the man who says: 'She made me so angry that I just had to hit her', and the man who says: 'I allowed her provocation to really get through to me'; the person who says: 'I suffer from indigestion' as opposed to 'I am giving myself a backache by tensing my neck muscles'. The phenomenological representation in language can thus reflect learned helplessness or intentionality. This assumption of responsibility, as mentioned earlier, is not to be confused with blaming, but is meant to emphasise personal agency and authorship for one's own life and experience.

In all cases what might seem a semantic difference is a very crucial stepping-stone in the counselling process. If it is you yourself tensing your muscles and creating a headache, then it is possible for you to become aware of how you are doing this. As you concentrate and attend to this process, the potential solution becomes available in the counselling consulting room between the counsellor and the client. If it is some mysterious germ that 'attacks you' or invades you against your will, and over which you have no influence at all, this creates an existential powerlessness which may be an equally viable philosophical assumption but is fundamentally de-powering and strips people of potential for changing their own reactions to situations.

Viktor Frankl (1964/1969) in his work *Man's Search for Meaning*, which Perls recognised as another form of *existential psychotherapy*, also stressed people's ability to choose their reactions in any given situation, even in situations which they have not chosen or engineered.

What we may not have choice over is the situation, but we can choose how we want to respond to it. Frankl uses many examples of people in concentration camps, some of whom chose to become demoralised, betrayed their friends and the best part of themselves. Other people chose to react to these deplorable circumstances with self-respect, if not hope, and with a commitment to finding some meaning which would transform the squalor and misery of their everyday existence into something transcendent.

In Gestalt, therefore, clients are encouraged to experiment with construing their experience verbally in ways that demonstrate that they are taking responsibility for it. In some variants of Gestalt this has become another set of rote rules, for example, don't say 'It hurts', say 'I hurt'. Don't say 'You are hurting me', say 'I am hurting myself with your behaviour'. With such rote interventions the original intention has been lost, because then people may learn to say the right words but their experience is still that of an object upon whom life and other people act. To invite clients to change their language is to invite them into taking responsibility for themselves, not into following another set of instructions which are prescribed from the outside.

Exploring Non-verbal Behaviour

Gestaltists are usually vividly attentive to their own non-verbal behaviour and that of their clients. Crossed ankles, coughing, one shoulder being higher than another, are all important parts of the counselling process, especially as Gestalt attempts to encompass the whole person and seeks to integrate as many diverse aspects of that person as possible. Non-verbal behaviour can be explored by drawing it to the attention of the person, such as 'Are you aware that you blink your eyes much faster whenever you speak about your mother?'. Another way would be to ask people to exaggerate a particular movement, for example a gently kicking foot in the direction of the counsellor may, with such an invitation, bring to the awareness of the client his unexpressed anger at the counsellor. Seeing a video of themselves with the soundtrack deleted can be a fruitful experiential exercise for people to explore their own physical postures, non-verbal behaviour and attitudinal position in the world.

Redirecting Deflected Energy

Awareness is most profoundly disturbed by deflection — ways in which we reduce the impact of the environment on ourselves. Individuals may need to learn to re-direct their deflected energy by superficially simple manoeuvres such as making eye contact while talking about themselves. Some clients need to allow themselves to really make an impact on other people. One client said that she felt she

had achieved this when she could reliably get service from a bartender in her due turn. In her past she usually was ignored while other people pushed in and got served before her. Clients may need to be encouraged to allow other people's communication and feedback, including their lovingness or appreciation, to really get through to them. Clara habitually complained that nobody appreciated her, yet when complimented she would regularly minimise thus: 'Oh it was nothing really.' As a child she was regularly ignored or blamed, so she never learnt to tolerate positive attention. By continuing to deflect such positive attention in her current life she of course perpetuates the fixed Gestalt of her past in her present relationships. Undoing deflection may require that clients relinquish deflecting mannerisms such as chewing gum, self-distracting body movements (twitching, finger rolling) or habitual facial expressions (frowning, blinking) which serve to reduce the quality of their awareness. When they become intensely aware of *how* they are creating the mannerisms, often the organismic need emerges. 'I roll my fingers in order to reassure myself that I am real'.

Many people do differential deflecting. They may accept all the positive things that people say about them but deflect any negative feedback. Other people only pay attention to negative feedback when it originates from envious or hostile sources, while deflecting appreciative recognition from reliable and trustworthy sources. Simple but important methods may include paying equal attention to positives, writing them down, repeating them to oneself. Deflection takes energy away from helping the person to get what he or she wants from life. Direct contact, whether with love or anger, food or physical exercise, enhances the quality of life and ensures that there are commensurate returns on the investment of time and energy. The deflected energy needs to be brought back on target and the person encouraged to get into direct contact with themselves, others and the environment. Circumlocution, abstract language or habitual self-denigration must usually stop in order for the person to feel that she is getting what she wants from life and that her rewards are commensurate with her investment of attention and energy.

Developing Sensory Awareness

For Perls it was important to differentiate between body, emotions and thinking. Most of us have lost large areas of sensory awareness and proprioceptive sensitivity in our bodies. These losses to our awareness often represent solutions to what at the time of suppression was an intolerable conflict, painful trauma or enduring deprivation. In counselling some of these archaic difficulties can be brought into awareness in a context of healing and authentic relationship. In this

way the missing parts of the person as a body-mind whole can begin to be reclaimed.

Concentrate on your 'body' sensation as a whole. Let your attention wander through every part of your body. How much of yourself can you feel? To what degree and with what accuracy and clarity does your body — and thus you — exist? Notice pains, aches and twinges ordinarily ignored. What muscular tensions can you feel? Attending to them, permit them to continue and do not attempt prematurely to relax them. Try to shape their precise limits. Notice your skin sensations. Can you feel your body as a whole? Can you feel where your head is in relation to your torso? Where are your genitals? Where is your chest? Your limbs? (Perls et al., 1951/1969: 86)

Perls defines neurosis as the extent to which there is a discrepancy between the verbal concept of the self and the felt awareness of the self. The best attitude for exploring this in yourself and in your clients is non-judgemental and curious experimentation. The development of sensory awareness in terms of smelling, tasting, listening, truly seeing and touching is not only therapeutic in the Gestalt approach but also essentially celebratory. Many people have been trained out of experiencing their natural taste or smell preferences in awareness, thereby depriving their experience of meaning, intensity and variety.

A very common outcome of the successful re-establishment of sensory and proprioceptive sensitivity is that people report awareness of pain whereas previously similar stimuli would leave them unaffected. Typically, a client reports 'I used to have a dentist drill my teeth without anaesthetic, but now it hurts too much'. The same applies to emotional sensitivity, particularly for people who learned to deny themselves a full range of emotional expressiveness as children, for example, under threat of bodily harm from abusing parents. They may become more sensitised to when people become insulting or injurious to them, whereas before counselling they might have let all such occasions pass. People may also become more attuned to the subtle manifestations of kindness, care and consideration which they receive from people in their environment: 'I never realised how friendly most people are when asked for help.'

Facilitating Transition

The first phase of counselling can be very satisfying for the client and counsellor alike, because of the focus on building or creating a relationship. Often this relationship, based as it is on respect for the person's basic health and organismic integrity, is the first in which the client feels truly validated as a person. For the counsellor too, this phase is gratifying. Most counsellors know how to establish relationships, and it is often their facility with this that attracts them to the profession. However, transition to another more demanding period

may feel as though 'the honeymoon' is over. Many counsellors need training and supervision in helping them to make this transition to deeper and more difficult waters.

The Start of Gary's Journey

Gary had been living with Jessica for the past six years and he had found it very unsatisfactory for the last two of those years. Despite his growing discontent and frequent fantasising about how he could establish something better with someone different, he continued to stay with Jessica through fear of being alone, and guilt about hurting her. One afternoon on the university campus where he was a lecturer, he noticed an announcement about a forthcoming course of evening lectures on 'psychology for the lay person'. Psychology had been a field which he had until then regarded with suspicion, if not dislike. One of the lecturers mentioned on the poster was, however, someone he had previously heard speak on fields nearer his own, and he had found her highly lucid and interesting. Gary decided to attend these lectures. In the course of one of the evenings he learnt about third-force psychology and was fascinated by many of the ideas discussed, but in particular the idea of focusing on 'here-and-now-change'. His previous understanding of psychotherapy and counselling was largely based on media caricatures of a couch-bound patient endlessly ruminating about his past.

At the penultimate lecture he approached one of the lecturers (myself) and asked for a single counselling session - 'Just to look at whether or not I should leave my girlfriend . . . it won't take long.'

I made it clear to Gary that I would prefer not to see him for only a single session on such an important issue. We then agreed to spend a session exploring whether or not he in fact wanted to open a counselling relationship at that stage of his life.

At our initial session together, Gary arrived fifteen minutes early and when asked to wait he strode up and down the passage and looked relieved yet embarrassed when called into my consulting room. He sat in his chair with the lower part of his body sprawled and seemingly relaxed, yet his arms were fairly tightly folded across his chest and his right-hand fingers tapped a subtle tattoo on his left upper arm.

The vividness of these first impressions is characteristic of the naturally heightened awareness which attends beginnings. Many people can recall with exquisite detail beginnings they have experienced, and children are often fascinated by how their parents first met. In the same way the beginning of the counselling relationship is marked by a sensitisation of the counsellor and client to each other on a great many levels. With Gary I was aware of the colours, the quality and the

texture of his clothes, including a pair of rather dirty trainers. I could smell that he was a smoker and that he used aftershave. He appeared to be 'weighing me up' in a similar way. My awareness of myself included experiencing a curious attention, a slightly increased heart-beat, and I was peripherally aware of the sound of April rain falling on the roof.

I verbalised some of my awareness of him, myself and our environment as a means of demonstrating the awareness continuum. I invited him to verbalise his awarenesses, whether they were intellectual, fantasy, visual, auditory, olfactory or whatever else. As he was doing this he became aware of wanting to force or seduce me into giving him 'an answer' to his current problem, but at the same time not wanting to trust or believe that anything that I had to say could really be of help to him.

Near the end of that first session Gary became aware of the sense of relief that accompanied his sharing with 'someone who needs no reciprocal care-taking' and he contracted to continue counselling on a weekly basis. During many of those initial sessions Gary would want to spend considerable time relating his past experiences to me. Sometimes my listening to him seemed appropriate and I learnt, for example, that another reason Gary feared separation from Jessica was because she would comfort him after his fairly regular nightmares. At other times I would interrupt his talking, especially if I became aware of some other process pressing for attention. An example of this happened one afternoon. The tone of Gary's voice became more and more 'droning' as he described a sticky period of his adolescent school life. I listened for a short while and then interrupted:

'Gary, stop for a while. I am experiencing your voice as sounding more and more boring and bored and wonder what's going on for you right now as you recount this part of your life story?'

'I'm feeling dull . . . and yes . . . bored with myself . . . kind of heavy and dragging.'

'Speak the feelings of that twelve-year-old as if you can express them now.'

'He felt . . .'

'I feel . . .'

'Yes I feel um . . . heavy and bored. This is my first year at secondary school and I'm missing the countryside and the masses of free time I'm used to having in the afternoons and I'm really sad because . . .'

In this way heightened attention and awareness of the dullness and boredom led directly to an awareness of deep feelings of loss and loneliness. Later Gary easily recognised that his hostile dependency on Jessica was a way of avoiding experiencing his pain.

Also in this initial phase we struggled very consciously with his desire to control me, and his resentment at what he perceived to be his powerless dependency in the counselling relationship. Gary had an

habitual verbal mannerism which he used to deflect the emotional impact of his experience. This involved the frequent use of the impersonal pronoun 'one' as in — 'One naturally feels bad at wanting to leave someone who loves one so much.'

I used many types of intervention to invite him into the language of responsibility. His natural curiosity and pleasure in learning (demonstrated by his choice of occupation — lecturer — and by the manner in which he had 'found' me) were strong allies in this process as I taught him about the psychology of the language of empowerment. Another type of intervention I used was the use of humour — 'Gary, if *one* feels like that, how do *two* and *three* feel about it?' This form of gentle teasing was acceptable to him since he had a well-developed sense of humour himself which he could use to amuse or to attack.

Gary's desensitisation from his own bodily processes was reflected in his increased desire to smoke whenever he felt emotional, this he showed by statements like — 'What I wouldn't give for a fag now.' Unable to smoke in my consulting room Gary directed his energy into biting his cuticles, tapping his fingers or fiddling with his shirt collar. After several sessions Gary began to realise that when he stopped agitating in these ways he became aware of an overpowering fear of being alone, which seemed to date from his infancy. Keeping Jessica around was his main method of avoidance of his primal fear, and continuing to resent her was at another level his organismic protest against the negative merging or confluence. This willingness to experience his basic fear, and to take responsibility for his dissatisfaction in his relationship with Jessica, marked the transition from him being aware of discomfort to him beginning to be in contact with the excitement and mobilisation of his resources for himself.