

Stages in a Gestalt Therapy Session and an Examination of Counselor Interventions

Part 1: Conceptual Framework

Part 2: Workshop

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Abstract

A four stage overview and analysis of a Gestalt Therapy session, including conceptual and practical guidelines is presented in part one. Part two focuses on a tutorial workshop designed to enhance the skills of counseling students.

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Introduction

Gestalt therapy is a existential/humanistic approach to counseling developed by Frederick and Laura Perls(3,4). Since its inception in the 1950s & 60s many practitioners have utilized and modified Perls' approach (e.g., 1,2,5). The current paper draws on the author's forty plus years of experience in teaching, training university students and practicing Gestalt Therapy.

Gestalt therapy alerts us to the interrelationship between awareness and energy. When awareness is scattered and bound up in unknown feelings and thoughts, energy flow is diminished throughout one's personality. A Gestalt counselor, by suggesting the practice of certain "experiments" in awareness focusing, aids and amplifies a client's effort to free him- or herself from energy blocks mentally, emotionally, and physically. From this perspective, every psychological problem can be explored and resolved as a polarized conflict between two aspects in personality. Four stages in the unfolding of a therapeutic session and corresponding counselor behaviors which serve to guide a conflict into awareness, expose its ramifications in a client's external and internal experience, and aid in its resolution will be examined.

Stage 1: Emergence of the Problem

Each client, each session is unique -- an inter-play of skill, experience, levels of growth, actual needs and random factors present in the encounter between participants. The subtle blueprint of this first stage involves a client bringing into awareness with increasing intensity a major conflict in the "here and now" of a counseling session. Initial interventions guide the client's attention to his or her immediate experience -- the "what and how" of behavior -- and away from speculations as to causes -- the "whys" for such action. During this process, clients are encouraged to assume increasing responsibility (ability to respond) for individual thoughts, feelings, and sensations; and to experience the intimate, basic connection between verbal and nonverbal behaviors.

The Gestalt therapist operates in a more dynamic and active manner than that of a Client-Centered counselor who relies primarily upon receptive qualities expressed through empathic reflection of feelings. In Gestalt work, one approaches the first phase of a session by exploring what a client is currently experiencing in awareness. As feelings and sensations are reported, links to body awareness are emphasized and one may be asked to give the selected physical areas a "voice." If a client has difficulty bringing into awareness and expressing such material, attention can be directed to obvious body correlates of verbal expression such as breathing pattern, hand gestures, voice tone, and posture. To facilitate greater clarity of experience of a particular body area, one can suggest that a client repeat, exaggerate, or spontaneously develop a particular physical action in nonverbal form or express with increasing loudness and meaning key words and sentences. A Gestalt counselor pays special attention to the subtle discrepancy between verbal and nonverbal action as this often indicates a block in awareness which can mask a significant tension area. Clients can be guided to experience greater degrees of personal responsibility by the simple means of restating and repeating particular phrases in communication, e.g., substituting "want" for "should," "won't" for "can't," "I" for "it," and presenting all material in the present tense.

Avoid interpreting and evaluating a client's behavior as this can block immediate experience and provoke defensiveness, thus hampering the flow of a session. Intuitive insights into a client's behavior patterns can be effectively utilized by suggesting experiments in awareness focusing in which a client can experience possible factors that are believed to tie into the current problem. If experiments are presented with much hesitancy and fear of failure, they are often weakly complied with or rejected. Therefore, one is encouraged to present such tasks with a firm and helpful attitude; one which allows no shame or blame for the apparent unproductiveness of a particular exercise. Projections of mistrust directed at an observing group or counselor may be worked with by asking the client to give them a voice, then to reply, and to maintain this dialogue until negative feelings are re-owned and tension released. Deal with any projections toward you as a counselor within a framework of external dialogue (see Stage 2). Take the opportunity to work through personal defensive reactions in a session where you can function as a client. The end phase of Stage 1 is marked by a client's ability to readily focus awareness when directed and express feelings and sensations in the immediate present. At this point, a specific emotional problem is often present in awareness along with a corresponding physical area of tension. In addition to awareness probing ("What are you aware of now?") which aims to establish a link between body and feeling states, fantasy work, nonverbal explorations and direct questions can be utilized to bring an unfinished issue into focus. Guided fantasy work often allows clients to symbolically present unresolved problems with minimal resistance, while nonverbal activities encourage overly intellectual or verbally blocked individuals to more spontaneously express themselves. The direct questions, "What do you want to work on today?" or "What do you want to avoid working on today?" can at times elicit important material to explore.

Clients display varying resistance to Gestalt work. Overall resistance serves to inhibit natural growth processes and functions to manipulate the external environment. Appropriate to the skill and experience of the counselor, the frustration of such resistance patterns throughout the first stage is a necessary intervention for continued movement. The labeling of the game the client is "playing" (e.g., helpless, stupid, confused, seductive) a dramatic withdrawal of the therapist's interest, or the suggestion of a seemingly extraneous nonverbal action for client to engage in, e.g., singing or jumping, are possible tactical responses. Strategically, such encounters require advanced counseling skills practiced with a Zen-like attitude: courage, compassion, and a non-attachment to the outcome.

Stage 2: Working with External Polarities

The client is now asked to take the growing tension that is experienced and explore it within the framework of an external dialogue. Whether the conflict is presented as an intra- or interpersonal one, it is most often necessary to initiate the dialogue as a conversation between two people, the client and a significant other. Underlying internal polarities (Stage 3) are typically obscure and require the experience of emotional intensity resulting from an external conversation to bring them into fuller awareness. Work with internal polarities at this phase tends toward superficiality and an emphasis on a purely intellectual approach to conflict resolution.

With an interpersonal problem, there is little difficulty in employing two chairs and having the client change places as a conversation unfolds. If a client is eager to work within an area of perceived personal deficiency (too submissive, lonely, angry) direct that the dialogue involve another person with whom such feelings are currently experienced, or historically have been experienced, or even hypothetically can be experienced. When appropriate, suggest that clients engage in a dialogue with a parent or sibling who was critical in early emotional conditioning. Continue to be alert to the verbal/nonverbal discrepancy and utilize techniques discussed earlier. At times it will be helpful to have a client try a particular line (on for size) or intensify nonverbal activity (e.g., hitting a pillow, standing up) to accompany the dialogue. The major thrust of the work at this point is to bring hidden feelings into awareness by dramatizing the outer manifestation of an inner conflict. In the closing phase of Stage 2, clients can become quite immersed in the process of self discovery and need little overt guidance to shuttle between chairs, appropriately express feelings, monitor and modify behavior patterns. While each dialogue will have its own rhythm and momentum, it is useful to have the client sequentially express: (a) what are the direct issues and feelings present in the relationship with the significant other; (b) what are the covert feelings and hidden agendas perceived in the relationship; and, (c) what are the desired solutions to the stated issues and conflicts. Be alert to a sudden withdrawal of involvement, confusion, and reluctance to continue. This behavior can signify the "impasse" in Gestalt work, reflecting the emergence of the "implosive layer" of personality which requires more active intervention from the counselor.

Stage 3: Working with Internal Polarities

All external difficulties, in a Gestalt framework, can be re-perceived and potentially resolved as internalized tensions. Inner imbalances, cognitive, emotional, physical, are based on conditioning in our personal history and tend to be maintained by reinforcement of established behavior patterns. It is clear that such imbalances focus and shape our perceptions and emotional reactions to external reality, and less obvious but profoundly critical in our experience is the fact that these very imbalances draw into our lives a further compounding of external problems. In Gestalt work, one validates the principle that factors in consciousness determine behavior. A major growth step for a client is to recognize that the conflict being explored in the external dialogue can simultaneously be understood and more effectively resolved as a reflection of a deep internal tension. The accomplishment of this critical shift in self-understanding requires a sufficient amount of objective awareness on the part of the client. Thus, if a counselor directs a client who is totally identified in the external problem to shift to Stage 3, frustration and confusion will result. In such sessions, it is best to aim for an integration (Stage 4) of the conflict within the form of a more external solution. Those clients who do respond to a refocusing of the dialogue in terms of internal polarities often require precision of labeling and clarification of meaning from the therapist regarding the polarities they are exploring. While a re-clarification of meaning and refinement in labeling by both client and counselor is necessary in order to reduce confusion, it is more productive to explore one major polarity per session.

The central focus of activity at this stage is a growing confrontation between two significant and opposing aspects within the client's personality. The more fully each aspect or pole of tension is dramatized and experienced, the more likely it can be resolved. Thus, counselor behavior is geared to aid clients in giving each aspect its full voice, appropriate gestures, and nonverbal stance. During a session, one can observe an inner conflict, initially latent, emerge with increasing power as the thoughts, feelings, sensations and bodily responses associated with an historical trauma come into awareness. The basic ambivalence, the polar nature of tension, strikes us as we observe each aspect surface in its identity. As each polarity expands its "territory" in awareness, the tension may painfully stretch until, from the client's point of view, it is unresolvable, unbearable, a desperate void. This phenomenon, while not present in all sessions, is indicative of the "implosive layer" of personality and is a necessary precondition for the formation of a new Gestalt.

Stage 4: Integration

When successful, this stage celebrates the triumph of unifying over separative factors within the client's personality, signals the emergence of a new Gestalt, and reflects that within the struggle between the yin

and the yang is the Tao. The core element here is a resolution of the internal conflict resulting from a major reorganization and re-perception of the problem. The more powerfully the conflict rises into awareness, the greater the potential for release. In its more dramatic form, the release is a spontaneous, uncontrolled physiological outpouring -- tears, laughter, rage -- a manifesting of the "explosive layer" of personality. Explosive expression of integration, like an initial satori, can have a lasting effect as blocks to inner sources of energy are released. However, the intensity of a reaction does not necessarily reflect the growth producing value of an integration, many of which can take a more gentle outer form with profound inner consequences for development.

Integration is a continual, evolutionary, life-sustaining experience -- there is no "final" Gestalt. In the process of integration, factors that were opposing each other in consciousness mutually move to accept each other's actual identity that was hidden behind a conditioned mask of pain, rage, or weakness. With this accomplished, these elements begin to relate more harmoniously and the whole personality experiences a fresh flow of life energy, an increased capacity for enjoyment, and a more expanded awareness into areas of existing and still unresolved tensions.

As you are empathically unified with your client, you will sense when an integration of the polarities has taken place. Explosive integrations are quite clear and, in addition to external observation of change, one often finds sympathetic responses in one's own body corresponding to the client's breakthrough. Less intense breakthroughs can also be perceived externally in the form of relaxation of muscles, smiles, laughter, quiet sighs, and sobs. It is important to be alert to the less intense expressions of integration, so that you can acknowledge that the session is completed and make no further demands on the client to produce a more intense reaction. Most sessions fall short of full spontaneous integrations (which probably reflects clients' resistances to change, and level of the skill of the counselor). Much can be accomplished by working with clients to harmonize a conflict through the use of guided integration techniques. Four types of approaches, which can be applied singularly or in combination will be indicated. One can encourage clients to express verbally what each opposing aspect can truly appreciate and respect in the other. Some clients will respond more effectively to the opportunity to express these attitudes in a nonverbal manner, through gesture or movement. A guided fantasy of mutual acceptance can be presented by the therapist which incorporates the positive qualities of each aspect; perhaps taking the form of each polarity moving toward each other, and embracing. Some clients who are responsive to meditation methods may choose to work with a meditation technique which allows them to harmonize and integrate the polar tension.

To facilitate a client's cognitive reorganization you may at times present your perceptions of the changes you observed from the beginning to the end of a session. In order to close the psychological distance between client, counselor and group, some limited sharing of reactions are often helpful after the client leaves the hot seat. Keep in mind, however, that the sharing phase is still part of the therapeutic session and prolonged interactions among participants can seriously scatter a client's awareness and hamper the subtle integrations taking place.

Part 2: A Gestalt Tutorial Workshop for Counseling Students

This workshop is going to examine many of the things that could happen and might happen, as well as provide general guidelines for doing a Gestalt session with a guest. So, let's see... first things first, bring equipment with you---a packet of tissues. I don't know whether you are going to need them or not, but it turns out that anywhere from a quarter to a third of guests will come in and deal with some important emotional issues and start crying. You want to take it as a matter of course that they may do this, and not get too uptight about it, so have something, like a tissue, that's going to feel comfortable for them. So that's one thing.

The second thing is to arrange the chairs in such a way so that you have your chair, then you have another opposite you, where the client sits. And then a third chair that's empty, that's also next to you. So, it's a subliminal message to them that this empty chair will have some meaning in the session, and that you'll clarify that later when you get into some role playing.

Stage One: Emergence of the Problem

You are sitting opposite the client/guest, and you've done your social introductions. I've generally oriented them in the classroom, so they know how long it's going to take and that they'll be doing some role playing. They also know that they will be an observer, and that the session is geared to increasing self-awareness. And then we're ready to go. So, what is the first thing you say Jennifer?

JENNIFER: What are you aware of today?

FIEBERT: That is not quite right. "What are you aware of right now?" Today is too broad. The alternative to that is: What are you experiencing right now?"

What would be the most difficult thing a client could say to you today at this point?

ROBERT: I'm not aware of anything? Not experiencing anything.

FIEBERT: Well then, Christy, what do you do?

CHRISTY: If they say nothing?

FIEBERT: Yeah.

CHRISTY: I would probably say... Nothing probably does mean something to you. Tell me more.

FIEBERT: Okay. That's not a bad a choice. You don't want to see this as going for "right" answers and "wrong" answers. There are continually going to be choices. So, you are going to get a response and then there is going to be branching off into various possibilities. So, okay, what does nothing mean to you? Or give me an alternative, what else you can you do to kind of move the session along?

ANNA: What does nothing feel like?

FIEBERT: Yeah, that's a possibility. But--

ANNA: How about, "What are you feeling emotionally?"

FIEBERT: I like that. Okay.

Actually, you are asking a general question: What are you experiencing? or What are you aware of right now? But you also have to have in mind that behind that there are three or four core systems which you can tap into. You have the person's body, their feelings, and you have their thoughts. So if they say, "Not much", you might want to focus a little bit more on where their experience or awareness is possibly going on. For example, you can say, "What are you aware of within your body right now?" Or you can say, "What are you aware of with regard to your feelings right now?" Or, "What are you thinking right now." Any of these approaches can work.

The choice you make at this point is going to depend on how the person is behaving with you. The one that has a possible low payoff is if you say to them, "What are you experiencing in your body right now?"-- they may not say much because they don't monitor their body very well. So they could say, for example, "I feel a little achy in my shoulder," etc. You have to make a judgment pretty quickly whether there is going to be a payoff to "track out" a particular discomfort here, trying to determine if it significantly ties in to the client's personal - interpersonal and emotional life. Sometimes it might be better, depending on how you read the person, to go for: "What are you aware of with regard to your feelings right now?"

A second possibility, in addition to their saying, "Not much," they may be saying to you (in an indirect way) that they really don't want to be here as a client. Or that they are fearful. And if you get a hunch that's going on, you may want to go for that first, rather than trying to track the route up the mountain of: "What are you experiencing with your feelings," "What you experiencing with your thoughts"; or "What are you experiencing with your body." You may want to say, "Well, I could be wrong, but I have a hunch that you're not sure you really want to be doing this at all."

If you get a smile, because it may not be socially okay for them to say, "You're right, I'm leaving," then you're into a whole different game. Then you can start working with that level of resistance.

How do work with that, Alex? If someone gives you the clue that they don't really want to be here, how would you work with them on that?

ALEX: "Where do they want to be?"

FIEBERT: That's one choice. If they'd rather not be here, where do they want to be? And then you can sort of find out - they may get animated and say, "Well, I'd like to be, you know, in Hawaii, and they may begin to show a little bit of animation. You might find a session there. I'm not going to follow that route, but I am going to say that probably has some potential. Another way of going, is to say directly, "Let's try an experiment--- why don't you say, 'I don't really want to be doing this,' and

the client says, "I don't really want to be doing this." Then you asked them to say it louder. Okay. Then you might say, "See if you can make a gesture when you say it." Sometimes a gesture will be stamping their feet while saying, "I don't want to do this. I don't want to do this. I don't want to do this."

And as they do that, what will be happening is that their level of resistance will be coming into greater awareness. And when it comes into increasing awareness, you will often note that the resistance here begins to dissipate some. So the client is coming into the HERE and NOW. The resistance is that they don't want to be in the here and now because of their fears of what this is going to mean to them, what they're going to expose, what you might think of them, that sort of stuff, which is mysterious to them and perhaps to you, too. But if you get them to verbalize their resistance and dramatize it a little bit, something useful may come into their awareness.

I want to stick with that one a bit more. So as they say, "I don't want to be here," and they say it louder and louder, then you can have a conversation with them. For example, you can say, "Okay, what's coming into your awareness now", and it might be that they really know, and say, "I'm afraid that you're going to think I'm too neurotic or you're going to think I'm too stupid, or I don't want to be vulnerable," etc. So that's good if they can take that degree of responsibility. If they start projecting onto you, such as, "you're going to think that I'm screwed up or crazy, etc.," say 'let's try another experiment. Why don't you put yourself in my place -- what do you think I'm actually thinking about you?'

So here you having them own their projections onto you-- they projected something onto you and now they have to speak from the projection. The whole purpose of doing all of this stuff is to bring them into the here and now so they can move forward to deal with some unresolved issue. Most people will be able to move earlier than this, but I'm talking about the people who have a little bit more resistance.

Let's say you have a very resistant client, and somebody who is not very aware. You know, their resistance may be the fact, not so much that they are fighting you, but they just don't monitor themselves. They're so extroverted, if you will, that they are just looking at the world out there and not looking at the world inside here. So the suggestion that Alex made, of asking where would they like to be, can often yield some useful things. It can reveal where their feelings and desires are, what place... and it isn't just a physical place, but it's really about what kind of emotional place they are looking for. Are they looking for a place of isolation, where they don't have to deal with the stimulation of other people? Or are they looking for a party, you know, where there's a whole bunch of other people around to provide social, sexual stimulation for them. So you sort of look at what that means for them, because there's no "pat" answer.

Another kind of resistance that some people manifest is talking a lot, they're very verbal, some very articulate. They start taking over the session as if it were a monologue, and you're there as kind of a person who is supposed to appreciate their cleverness, or their words, etc. And you know the session is going to go someplace, but it's going to be totally under their control, and it's going to be totally cognitive, totally in their head.

So you might say to them... you have to do it gently because these people might feel, I don't know, threatened a bit, but I think you can find a way. So you'd say to them: "Let's try a different experiment. Rather than your telling me what your problems and issues are, why don't you stand up and then non-verbally show me, by some gesture, what's going on with you?" Now I always like to do the non-verbal activity by having them stand up first, then show you. Rather than saying, 'I'm going to ask you to stand up andyada, yada, yada. If you ask 'permission' it could hit their resistance and they may not do it. But if you say, 'Let's stand up,' so you've got them up, and then you say, "Now show me what this means." It's not that you are being too controlling or even cruel with them, but you want them to do something that's going to shut off their verbal stuff and get them into their body a little bit more.

You might say such things as: "Show me by a gesture, by moving to the wall, imagine somebody is making you do something so you can push against them." When they start behaving nonverbally, you'll see that they're into it. You say, 'Ah-ha! There's something cooking here,' and then you say, "Hasn't it happened to you in your life before?" And they say, 'Yes,' and then you're into the transition into stage two, because when it has happened before, where another person has made them do something and then they tell you about it, then you have that little dialogue with them.

A sure-fire starter, if everything else has failed. Don't do this too early, but if you've kind of exhausted your repertoire, and not much is cooking and you really want to make progress here, you say, 'Let's try another experiment. Close your eyes, imagine you're sitting in front of a computer screen and that you open the file of, for example, Kenny's life. And there in the file are the three most important things in your life. Read them off to me.'

So what you've done is to create a situation in which the client is working with a visualization fantasy and they're having to produce. It's their life, everyone has a life. And there are some things that are obviously going to be more important than others, so they have to acknowledge and produce one of the three most important things in their life. So they say, "Maybe my job, my family and my girlfriend". Then you'd say, "So, look over that file, carefully. Where do you think the most conflict is going on now?" So then they tell you something. Then you might say: "Open your eyes," and then you have a little conversation with them to figure out what's going on. Of course, you know that you're going to transition from whatever they're saying here into stage two.

The decision is made here as to how much time you spend in stage one to get to stage two. And some sessions, it may be as quick as three or four minutes. Some sessions it may be 10 minutes. In general, don't let it go anymore than 15 minutes in stage one. You need to zero in on something. If you find that you are exploring everything all over the planet with them, try to get focused and say, 'Okay, let's take a chance and work on some issue that I think sounds like it's important to you.' And then structure them into a dialogue with somebody.

Stage Two: External Dialogue

(TO THE STUDENTS) See if you can think of a problem that you think would be difficult to get into stage two. For instance you're dealing with somebody, and they tell you all this stuff about them, but you can't get a handle on how you might get into stage two. Anything occur to you? I'm looking for examples from you that might be difficult transitions to stage two. Another example might occur when people talk about things that don't involve other people. Maybe somebody says, "I have low self-esteem, you know, I just don't feel good about myself. I feel like anytime I try, I fail." You sense that what they're saying is genuine, but you don't have a handle on who else is there. So, what can you do about that?

SUSAN: Ask them who they usually talk to about that.

FIEBERT: That's a good one, I like that. There are usually two ways of going: If they're talking about a personal problem that doesn't seem to involve anybody, you can say to them, 'Has anyone ever made you feel like this?' Or, 'Tell me about a time earlier in your life, when a situation like this has come up.' They may say, "Well, when I was six years old, you know, my mother told me that I was stupid and I shouldn't plan on any career. I should find a man and get married". So you can ask, "How do you get along with your mother now?" You become aware that this is an imprint that has had a profound, somewhat traumatic effect, even if it's not in their consciousness now, it's still there, as an unresolved thing, and you are going to create a situation where they can explore that.

As a back-up, you can also ask, have you shared this with any of your friends?" And if they say, "No, not really," you can then ask, "Well, do you have any good friends?" To that they may even answer, "No." So they're making it really hard for you. Then you can say: "Did you ever have a really good friend?" Then they could say, "I had a good friend when I was 10 years old." Then you say, "Tell me about her," and then say, "Okay, let's try this experiment: Let's imagine that your friend from when you were 10 years old was sitting over there, and you're going to tell her about some of the things that are troubling you right now." It'll work. And a lot of times people who have "social disabilities", if you will, people who don't relate well to people, people who don't have very many friends, you know, who are stuck in their own world and in their own mind, you can create a situation in which they're forced to interact... you know, role playing can be very beneficial. Because they're going to have to generate meaningful communication and they're going to have to put themselves in the place of the other, which is the real task for them to do, which is lacking for them in a developmental sense. So, I'm assuming that all of you can find a stage two framework.

The other thing to be aware of is that sometimes the client comes in and they're just really cooking. They say, "There's a part of me that just feels like... I'm so dependent on my boyfriend. When he's not

around I just feel so empty and lost. And there's another part of me that just wants to do my own thing." They're kind of giving you the polarities right off the bat. Don't fall for it! You know the polarities are there. You know that these are good polarities, but if you work with them prematurely, what will happen is that they're not going to get the most out of it emotionally. They'll do it cognitively, the client may increase their conceptual understanding, but they're not going to be letting go enough with spontaneity to really get the most out of it. So what you can say to them is, "That sounds good." And you know you're going to come back to that polarity. But you're going to do some interaction work with them. Part of the interaction work with them is for you to establish a rapport, so that they trust you to be able to guide them through certain things. Verbally and nonverbally you must feel some mastery there, so that they trust that you have their best interest in mind. Even though it is your "show", it has a certain collaborative element, in that you are monitoring them along the way. And then as you go through the external polarity, they will yield some useful stuff about their lives. And they will certainly get into it more. They will be more spontaneous, more in the here and now, more into the nonverbal. Then you'll shift into the inner dialogue.

So now we're looking at the beginning of stage two, we're looking for sort of basic stuff that you do here. Dwayne, what are your first moves in stage two?

DWAYNE: First, I bring in somebody else.

FIEBERT: Yeah. Don't do this thing of having them come through the door. Just say, "Imagine X is sitting over here." Then what do you want to do with that?

DWAYNE: Try to figure out what they want to say to the person.

FIEBERT: Well, you will, but you want to do something before that.

DWAYNE: Describe the person.

FIEBERT: That phrase is an important one because it really gives them a lot of latitude. They can say a whole bunch of things: They could say he's big and tall, or cruel and mean. If they are going for the emotional things, you know that's going to be important. If they're going for the descriptive things, that's the way they process the world, there's certain amount of distancing or objectivity in that. So they are going to give you something about how they perceive their environment by what they describe. Now, they may give you half a description. That is, they say that he's wearing a sweater and he's so tall, and yada, yada, yada.

So then you can say, "Tell me about him emotionally." You want to "balance" it off. And you do it for two reasons: One it's giving you information about this significant other-- and it's also making the significant other seem as if they were alive for the person, that they're really there. It imbues them with energy. What's your second step? You got them to describe the person-- then what? What do you do next?

DWAYNE: Ask them what they'd like to say.

FIEBERT: Okay. That's a little too broad. Unless they have their mother there, or their father, or somebody who's a significant person, they could say millions of things about that. So you may want to narrow it down. So you might want to tell them, "Pick something that's important in your relationship with this person." And then tell them, how you relate to them, or what you want from them, or something of that nature." So you are not dealing with it too broadly, you're kind of giving them a task. And then they say their piece, and you're watching them closely. Because they may be saying some very interesting things, and I wouldn't interrupt, except that if it's just so juicy that I just couldn't help myself! You know, they may start making a gesture when they are talking to the significant other, and you say, 'Are you aware of the gesture you're making'? Some clients, when they are doing dialogue work, have an expression on their face that they are not aware of, because people don't monitor themselves. For example, they might be smiling. They might be talking about, you know, how much they resent their father's control, but they're smiling. I say to myself that this is the way their defenses work. The smile is like a paradoxical message. It's saying, "I'm hurt and I'm angry, but I don't want you to get too upset about that."

I wouldn't necessarily go into the analysis of the smile. You'd say, "You know, while you were talking were you aware that you were smiling?", and they might answer that they were not. Okay. Your first round is just to bring something significant into awareness that may not be there, if it's cogent. If it's not, then don't bother. The first part of the dialogue has been completed, then what do you do, Jessica?

JESSICA: Then have the other person respond.

FIEBERT: Okay. You want to first say, "Why don't you stand up and sit over here." It's best to do the activity before you tell them what you want from them. By doing it, they're sitting there, they're already in the other person's place, so from the other's point of view, what would they say then? So don't say, "I'd like you to change chairs, is that okay? If they say "No", then you're stuck. So you say, "Stand up and sit over there." It's not that you are being bossy, you're just guiding the session, that's your job. It's always interesting to see - to what degree the person can empathize from the role of the other.

I'm always thrilled when there's a conflict and the person who's sitting in the opposite chair really puts out some effort that really indicates that they have a clue of where this other person is coming from. Because then they will be able to work their problems through... most of the way through because they have that degree of sensitivity and empathy. So after that is done, then what?

EDGER: Now you tell them to sit in the other chair and you explain to them that you want them to be the other person...

Could you have them, for example, sit like that other person would?

FIEBERT: Only if they're having a lot of difficulty with the dialogue. If it's happening spontaneously, just let it be. Because you want to keep the session in the "here and now" and not distract them. So then they've done that, what do you do next?

ALEX: Then you send them back to themselves.

FIEBERT: It's a dialogue, but you don't want it to go on endlessly. You want it to touch some core points. Because you know the purpose of this session isn't to focus totally on the interaction with another person, it's for them to get in touch with something deeper inside of themselves. So then you're ready for the next thing, which is something they haven't done which is to say, "All right, now what I'd like you to do is to, let's say it's your brother, tell your brother some of the feelings that you can't say to him, some of your deeper feelings about what's going on between you." They may have done that anyhow, but most of the time they've played it pretty much on the surface, you know. For example they might have said, "I don't like you because you were mean to me, and well, too bad, I was doing the best I can, I don't like that anyhow". Then you come back with, "Why don't you share some of your deeper feelings". They may get stuck, this is where you're going to help out. So you're going to ask them to say, for example, "Deep down I'm afraid of you..." Or, "Deep down I really care about you, but I'm afraid to show it," or whatever else you intuit is going on. Remember, if they're not saying it, you're going to help them to say it.

You're often going to find that the second round, the "deep down" one is the one that evokes the emotions. They usually can fend off some of their surface feelings with parents or significant others by telling them, 'I'm angry at you,' but the deep down feelings are the ones that are softer, and that's where the sadness and grief and vulnerability is. So, they may start to talk there. And then you may hear a catch in their voice. And you know the next step is to let out their emotions but they are blocking it.

You can either encourage them by saying, "I'm sensing you're having some trouble expressing some of your feelings here. The real person, the one that you fear, is not here. We don't have to deal with the consequences of that"... so you're kind of encouraging them to emotionally let go, and that sometimes helps to release the emotions. Another way, and this is kind of a trick I learned in Gestalt counseling many years ago, and it often works--This works at least once a semester, where the person is at the point of choking up and holding back feelings, and you ask them, "What are you doing to hold back your feelings?" That phrase can serve as a trigger for an emotional release and the letting go of tears. Because what happens, is your words alert them to all the energy they are putting into to holding back the feelings, so as awareness increases, feelings let go. I think letting go of feelings in this safe situation is a good thing. And then you may have to reassure them: "I know it's painful to let out strong emotions, but you will understand yourselves a lot better, and it takes courage to let some things out as painful as that". So you're giving some reassurance here, even though it's in the middle of the session, that's fine.

You're going to finish up stage two by saying, "If you could resolve this problem with your brother, for example, how would you put it into words to have it resolved?" The purpose of that is that even though it doesn't get settled in the real world, any time soon, it creates a sense of closure within the client. They feel like somehow they, really were able to reach out, and then even though you are going to go into their internal polarities, you kind of closed out whatever this unresolved dialogue is with the

significant other. Then you ask them to sit over there, and you ask them, "What would you like them to say to you?" I mean, you may have to be the voice that sort of gives objectivity or rationality to it. For example, you might say, "Why don't you close your eyes and imagine that your mother is saying this..." If it's too phony for the client, she's not going to buy it, so you say, "Okay, let's just stop here."

Stage Three: Internal Polarities

Now we're going from stage two to stage three. This is both the heart of Gestalt, the central core of what the person is going to learn about how they are fighting themselves internally, and it's also possibly the most difficult intervention that you're going to make. I mean, it may actually be quite easy, but potentially it's a difficult intervention, because you're having to teach somebody who knows nothing about this process that there's a framework to doing it, a rationale to doing it, and then guide them into starting it. So you're probably going to have to say more to them than you would to your classmates who have been serving as clients as you transition from stage two to stage three.

So let me give you a "boiler plate" of what you could say, and then we'll refine it as you have certain needs. You might say something like, "You know, a lot of times when people are dealing with problems with other people that trouble them there's often an aspect of that problem that is a struggle that is taking place within themselves. What bothers you about somebody else is often something that could be bothering you about yourself." Then you say, (and that's where you can get personal) "For example, when you were talking to your brother here, I think there could be a struggle between the part of you that wants to please him, versus the part of you that wants to do your own thing." And then you can check out with them whether they are buying into that, whether they understand that, and whether they agree with that. So you ask, 'Does that seem right to you?' They might say, "No not quite, I'm not really trying to please him, I'm just trying to avoid his getting pissed off at me. So then you can redefine the polarities: 'Sounds like there's a part of you that is trying to reduce conflict.'

Now overall you've made that difficult transition from stage 2 to stage 3. The dialogue with the significant other is completed.

You'll know when a session is going well, when you're involved in it emotionally, when you're empathically engaged. If you're getting bored, if you find yourself drifting away, not much is happening here. You know, the client is not engaged. It may be like "Gestalt by the numbers." They're not doing it for real. So you want to see what you can do to engage them more.

If they don't accept the polarities as you presented them, ask them what polarities they see. That is often useful. They may be actually so in tune to what's going on at this point, that they're going to know the two sides of themselves.

JENNIFER: What do you do with a client who doesn't accept any polarities?

FIEBERT: You are essentially saying that the client is being resistant and indicating that there are no tensions inside of them. The client is communicating that the external world is the source of all their trouble?

JENNIFER: Yeah.

FIEBERT: Okay. So there's no different parts of the client ever in conflict? Not just in this situation, but not ever? Okay. Then let's work the internal polarities hypothetically. Let's do it as a pretend session. You "sneak it up on them" and the pretend session is about asking them to imagine, for example, that there is a part of them that likes to stay in control of everything, and there's a part of them that is feeling out of control, or helpless. Perhaps like when they were a kid and they didn't really know things very well, and they were kind of weak and helpless. See if you can sell them on that. And then you have the two sides and you can start doing the dialogue.

JENNIFER: What if they don't buy that, either?

FIEBERT: I think in 99+% of cases, even if they're not owning the polarity, they can work with the hypothetical. Let's look at a real-life situation. I was working with a woman whose father died, maybe six months, eight months prior. She was in a fair amount of grief and had blocked a lot of her feelings, so I was doing some stage 2 Gestalt with her, in which she was imagining her father there, and starting to talk to him, and before long she was really into letting go of the emotions. She was crying and from the words that she was saying, that she put into his mouth, she was experiencing a

fair amount of nurturant healing. It seemed inappropriate to have her do a stage 3 because she didn't seem to need it. She really needed to do the healing in stage two. And maybe at some later point she might look at herself as the grieving (hypothetical name) Sara, and the Sara who holds her feelings in check. Which made sense, but at that point she didn't need to work on that.

So if a person has a lot of strong emotions coming up in stage 2, you can see that this may be as far as they need to go that day. Then tell them that they did really well, but when you do further work, they might want to explore another layer of what's going on.

All right, so we've got the polarities and there's a nice formula I've been working on with polarities. When you first identify polarities, you want to have them sit in the place of each polarity to see if they can physically identify with one, not so much verbally and intellectually, but do it physically. For example, you'd ask, 'How would rebellious Kenny sit?' Then I would continue with, 'What would his motto be?' (as if on a sweatshirt) They may not get that right off the bat, but if they do, that's great! If they don't, then I help them out. When asked, "What is the polarity's motto?" and they say, "Well, "I'll do my own thing", or "Screw the world," or something like that, you can support them by saying, "That's great, sounds like that's the motto of the rebellious side. Then ask for a physical gesture that reflects the polarity. Now sit over there. Okay, how does obedient Kenny sit? What's his motto? And they reply, "Go along to get along." And what is his gesture? So now we've got the two polarities pretty well defined, not so much by the verbal labels, but by the person's kinesthetic awareness. The client has put their body into it, they've invested it with personal energy. Now you have the two polarities talk to each other. And so the dialogue proceeds as in stage 2. What would this one say, what would the other respond? As they are dialoguing, see if you can have them amplify the differences in the tension that exists between the polarities, so that they examine the contours of the struggle. Then you are getting a sense of which polarity is more dominant.

Ending the Session

The resolution in the third stage and the fourth stage can happen very quickly and often the two stages merge together. The core of the integration is that the person owns both polarities-- that they don't see it as a "war within" but rather see it as something that each polarity contributes to and benefits from. Both polarities are deeply offering something important to the total personality. That's why the session often ends with some laughter, because the client realizes that they've been fighting themselves for years! Or it breaks up with tears because they realize how much pain they've been in, often which has been self-inflicted. Clearly those are the more dramatic integrations. With more run-of-the-mill integrations the person perhaps more conceptually recognizes that the two polarities are truly themselves, and that they contribute to and own both of them. Now, if integration happens pretty spontaneously you don't have to do too much more except wrap up the session.

However, if it's not happening spontaneously, if there really is a war between two internal aspects, signaled by, "Why don't you get your act together, you've just been screwing me up, I have low self-esteem, I just can't handle that, you know, I don't have any friends because you're so worried about how you appear", that kind of thing---where we have an assertive competent self versus the incompetent self--- if that struggle is like a seesaw where one polarity is trying to overwhelm, destroy and replace the other polarity, then it's not going to work. The client doesn't know that. They may have to play it out another round or two, but YOU know that. So at some point you have to say, "Let's look at it differently." Have them sit in the "weaker" polarity and ask them to try to tell the "stronger" polarity what they contribute to the total meaning of the client's life. And they may not get it right away, but using the example of the low self-esteem polarity it might offer, "Well, I provide you with sensitivity. You know, I let you know that there are some things you just shouldn't take risks about. I'm your emotional side. I'm the side that lets you put your guard down so other people can see some of your softer feelings." So that's how it can work. You're helping the total person see what each polarity is contributing... So the client gets to the point at which they recognize what's going on, and they don't have to fight it. I mean, maybe the vulnerable, low self-esteem side played a certain part in getting her to a place where she can have enough confidence on her own. It's not going to go away totally, it's just going to stay in the background. So it used to be 80% of her life, and now it's 30% of her life.

If you understand that, you know how to solve that equation in the 3rd stage, you're going to help your client do it, too. But if you're still struggling yourself trying to have one side win, and the other side lose, it's not going to work. Because you're invested in a war in which there are really no victors, there is only pain. And it may mean that the weaker polarity, or the more "negative" polarity, needs to mature in some way. Maybe the negative polarity was one that was quite insensitive to others, it used to behave in cruel and sadistic ways. Maybe that polarity just had energy, it was very feisty and it needed to mature, and to not be so destructive. Now it can be channeled in a new area, sort of a Freudian sublimation.

The last thing we'll talk about is how to end the session with regard to a number of issues. One of them is to truly recognize when the session is over! Usually students stick with the session longer than they need to. My basic clue that the session is over is when the client looks relaxed. When we've gone through whatever it is, half-hour, 40 minutes, stage 1, stage 2, stage three, and then suddenly they're no longer tense, that something has resolved for them, and you may not have even spotted when it happened, so you say to the client that you noticed they are looking more relaxed. So they might answer, "Yeah, it's just not troubling me anymore." And you reply, "Maybe you've integrated something that was bothering you." Basically, you are saying common-sense, everyday words, but you're also helping mark off the fact that they passed through a completion of the cycle of the Gestalt session.

So that's my clue, when the client gets more relaxed, and also when I get more relaxed, when I'm no longer feeling that something has to get done. Something was done and I may have missed the final ending, the 'coda of the piece.' But now it's over. So then you say various things--you don't have to have it as a formula, but you can say, "That was a pretty good session. Looks like you got a lot out of that." By your comment you are essentially letting the client know that the session is over. Sometimes, if it's a particularly intense or emotional session, you may want to summarize what happened, not so much for any intellectual reasons, but really to get the person to look more objectively at themselves. Then they can leave the room, drive their car home and go back to their lives without being so enmeshed in their subjective world.

As an example, you might summarize: "You started off unsure where you were going, then we got into a conversation with your mother, and the flood gates opened because it was so intense and emotional-- in the process of that I think you discovered that you were dealing with the "little girl" side of you that wants to please your mother versus the more adult side that wants to be independent and go her own way. Looks like those two came together for you in some useful fashion"--so that's how I might summarize things.

Another thing I'd like you to do at the end is to give the client at least three compliments. Be sure that the compliment is genuine, because the person has gone through something where they were vulnerable, where they exposed something about their private life to a person who's a relative stranger, and that takes courage. So, I would say, 'Looks like you learned a lot about yourself and it really took courage to do that. You dealt with some feelings that I think are pretty important.' By saying that, you are essentially completing your role as counselor in the session.

Then you can chat up a bit, saying, 'We're just about finished now. I think that the observer is going to come in and talk to me about their observations, but it was nice meeting you and working with you.' They may have some questions that they want to ask you about-- just listen. You don't want to get too much into your personal life. They may ask you how long you've been doing this and what are your goals, etc. Be honest, for example, tell them when you are graduating, that you want to do some counseling and go to graduate school. They might even surprise you and say something like: "You'll make a fine counselor, you really helped me."

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