

## **Culture Change: Conversations Concerning Political/Religious Differences**

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At its core, Gestalt therapy embodies commitment to democratic and egalitarian functioning of persons in relation, not only in the therapy room or in organizations that employ us, but also in the everyday life that makes for our culture. If we are in the background in this culture, confined to our professional roles and, even there a minority voice, we nonetheless represent an orientation that is vitally needed in the various societies of our time. The pulse of democratic, egalitarian functioning is weak, indeed, and nowhere is it heard more faintly than in conversations among family, friends, neighbors and co-workers in everyday life. My purpose in this presentation is to suggest what this looks like and how we may begin to address the strengthening of democracy and egalitarianism.

By looking at conversations we have with each other through the lens of Gestalt therapy, we can discover the common sense of members in society and experiment with different ways of altering social discourse. With a different way of experiencing daily life, citizens will put into positions of authority persons with fewer authoritarian characteristics. One “point of application” of Gestalt therapy, as Kurt Lewin would frame it, is daily conversation around politics and religion, a lost art in modern America.

I became interested in this topic somewhat fortuitously. I had been working from the perspective of Gestalt therapy on how interactions take place inside social action groups striving to promote democracy and equality in the U.S. I published these studies in *Community and Confluence: Undoing the Clinch of Oppression*. Excited by what I was learning in this exercise, I asked my social work students to observe family and friends at Thanksgiving gatherings and to take note of what they did when a sexist, racist, homophobic or anti-Semitic remark or joke came into the room. Invariably some 60 to 80 per cent of the students remarked that such a joke did happen. Over several years I saw that the students dealt poorly with these remarks and I began to talk about how they might have handled the situation better. Along the way I also found that my sophisticated colleagues had similar difficulties.

Starting with the speculation that these remarks and jokes can be examined in the context of disturbances of contact, e.g. as projections, my students Janneke van Beusekom and Dorothy Gibbons and I worked on how to identify and transform poor handling in these matters into good handling. For instance, I began by reflecting on my dentist making a racist joke while my mouth was constrained by his equipment. I prided myself in that I had made a passing comment as I was leaving his office, to the effect that I was on my way to teach a course Racial and Ethnic Perspectives in Social Work. We concluded that this was a partial success, but hardly a definitive one. We have published the results of our efforts in the book *Encountering Bigotry: Befriending Projecting Persons in Everyday Life*.

We collected many examples from people we knew, and these instances covered conversations at work, at parties, in the privacy of home and similar informal settings. We were tapping into everyday conversations and there we found many moments of disturbed ego functioning. Many of the editors of this book at Jason Aronson where it was first published became excited by our ideas and they were not therapists. Others there wondered if we were expecting our general readers, the intelligentsia, to themselves act as therapists, which they were not. This debate inside the publishing house revealed how far we are from affecting daily life. Maybe it is time to devote ourselves to applying our understanding in more mundane ways.

We are not ourselves political leaders although people like Carolyn Lukensmeyer are active in the political world. Carolyn, a Gestaltist, was active in the office of the Governor of Ohio at one point, and has become President of America Speaks, an electronic forum to engage citizens in political participation. Also, we are not most of us religious leaders, and thus we do not have at our disposal the facilities of religious houses and organizations to put forward our democratic and egalitarian principles. Our professional lives are rather carefully circumscribed as we find in licensing laws in states and in countries. What then are we to do to carry forward our part in changing the common sense of our culture? After being blocked in my own thinking for some time, I remembered the life of Paul Goodman so artfully portrayed by Taylor Stoehr. Goodman was a peripatetic intellectual who went about observing quite mundane matters and brought them to the attention of the reading and thinking public as

his book on *Growing up Absurd* has shown. I remember running into him when we both had presentations at a conference organized by radical students at the University of Pennsylvania. He was a gadfly and filled a role I would hope to inspire in you for the days ahead.

As a start, I bring to you a basket of examples from my everyday life. I am hoping for you to surpass me in observing and spreading widely what you see, but I owe it to you to show you what I mean.

I was at a dinner party a year or so after George Bush and Dick Cheney took the country to war in Iraq. Early in the evening, shortly after our arrival, my host, an old friend, remarked that he had been at a Catholic wedding the previous day. In the midst of the wedding service the priest had asked that attendees pray for the President. My friend looked at his compatriots and rolled his eyes, which they did in return. Upon hearing this, I playfully said, “Why not blurt out, ‘No’”? That, of course, went over like a lead balloon. Rightly so. But then I suggested that my friend might have gone over to the priest after the service and voiced his disapprobation of President Bush. My friend retorted that this was a wedding and he did not want to disturb the atmosphere of the moment. I voiced my concern about our propriety and our retroreflecting our truth on such occasions such that we keep a right-wing and fundamentalist culture going.

You may have noticed that my friend and I were both imagining that the priest was in support of George Bush. The election was not distant and many Catholics supported Bush because he opposed abortion. That assumption came from our projecting. Some time later, I happened to use this example in a group I was running on conversations with persons who differ politically to show how when we retroreflect our differences, we become implicated in the ongoing assumptions. A Presbyterian minister in the group reminded me that it is commonplace to bless a leader, not necessarily in support of that leader’s policies, but merely to wish that the leader would be wise and productive in service to the country.

Thus, if my friend had pursued the priest and was openly curious about what the priest had in mind in this blessing, he might have engaged in a politically and socially useful exchange. Had the priest actually meant to encourage the group to favor the President and his war, my friend might have disagreed with him and shared his own

moral perspective. Had the priest merely followed a custom and upon questioning would have voiced his own opposition to the war in Iraq, my friend would have had a venue for his own political stance without disrupting a pleasant wedding party. In either case, he would not have had the unfinished business that led him to his remark to me at his dinner party. And my own projecting would have been foreclosed. I consider this example a case of a missed opportunity.

As I talk about this topic at social gatherings in my retirement community, I come across numerous stories of unfulfilling encounters between my friends and their family members who differ with them politically. Three of my friends describe right-wing relatives, a sister, a sister-in-law, a niece with whom they have unfinished business. Each situation is interesting and each poses its own challenge pertaining how to proceed in the relationship. When I hear their tales I become excited and exclaim that these are the conversations we need to pursue, to experiment with, and learn what works and what does not. Yet in two of these instances I must confess that I fail to persuade my friends to take the next step; in one, movement has begun.

A man tells me he is a Republican, a conservative one who would be labeled a “moderate.” His sister-in-law is a right-wing Republican with whom he regularly disputes. One or the other of them brings up their difference on any of several topics – abortion, war, gay marriage, etc.; -- and they keep on differing. They have a repetitive intellectual dance and do not meet. It slips out in our talking together that my friend believes his sister-in-law is “stupid,” but when I point out that this seems to be an angry judgment, he becomes confused and breaks off. He is careful not to be aggressive in the way he lives his life. He and his sister-in-law titillate each other in their talks and *have a continual agreement to disagree without moving from their own starting positions*. I begin to feel that I have in some sense succeeded in my ambition to enlighten on dealing with difference only when onlookers to our discourse tell me they see what I am doing and it gives them impetus to try experimenting in their own domains. And my friend who is resistant to change tells me later that he liked our engagement. I am saddened when he dies six months later.

I facilitated another group in my community concerning “difficult conversations with family and friends.” (There is a useful book out with the title of *Difficult*

*Conversations* with ideas something like mine, but I use Gestalt therapy in my colloquium.) One example from this group is as follows. A man in the group asserts that he has a difficult conversation to try with another man in the group. Both men have had an encounter in a previous committee meeting that was unfinished. The disposition of a willed contribution to the community was being talked about and the man who was being addressed by the protagonist in my group had spoken vigorously against a proposal concerning the allocation of the gift. This second man is a trial lawyer, a big man, with a strong voice, and he had influentially stopped the process in its tracks. The two men, whom I will call Alex and Zed, agreed to have the conversation with my facilitation.

Alex said he had felt bullied by Zed when I asked what it had been like for him in the committee meeting. In retrospect, I missed a bit here. *To feel bullied is to say that the other is a bully, but it is not to say what happens inside in the presence of a bully – a common attribution of an internal process to a social relation.* My minimal pursuit of this matter was not definitive, fortunately. I should better have asked further what it felt like internally to be bullied. Zed replied, however, that he knew he would be seen as a bully and he presented a rationale for his actions. As a lawyer he knew what others did not know, that the legal situation was being misrepresented and he was basically asserting the law. *When I urged him to tell us what it was like for him inside when he saw what was happening, he acknowledged, after some resistance, that he saw a juggernaut happening, a car rushing to hit him, and that he felt alone, and he felt responsible for upholding the law. As Zed revealed his inner life, and I emphasized his feeling alone, Alex moved toward him emotionally, and they quickly came to a mutual understanding of how to proceed at the next community meeting.* In my terms, they had a “meeting” in our presence, a view confirmed by a woman in the group who remarked on the changed non-verbal postures of both men. They were more open and relaxed after they reached their understanding.

The promotion of dialogue through the inclusion of each man’s inner experience of vulnerability led to a beautiful coming together. It also allowed me to speak about openness to vulnerability in our culture. We hear much from politicians about strength and strong measures of law and order and of tough love; and much from religious leaders about our weakness in the world, but neither politicians nor ministers do this in a growth-

producing manner. To be super-strong without being aware of our weakness in life is to be in denial of death. So the exclusion of vulnerability from daily discourse is harmful. Reflecting this exclusion, political leaders act as if they are invulnerable. President Clinton is reported to have said “better to be strong and wrong than weak and right.”

Yet being open about our vulnerability is ambiguous. On the one hand, it can be manipulative to claim one’s weakness as a means for handing over power and responsibility to others. To assert one’s weakness without also showing one’s continuing capacity to be influential is a disempowering of oneself. Presidents and candidates grab onto this and tell us they can protect us far beyond what they can in fact do. On the other hand, one can be openly realistic about one’s vulnerability and still not surrender one’s influence in the world. We can be both weak and strong and have both in our talking with one another. We practice this all the time in doing our therapy when we are confused, anxious or otherwise beset and yet remain in connection with our clients.

Here is another example. In our group on Difficult Conversations was a woman who had been a successful politician who talks excessively. That is, she said interesting things and then kept on talking beyond what a listener could be ready to hear. Another member of the group said to her that she could use an editor to pare down her words. There was an edge to this comment and I became concerned that the talker would become defensive. I chose to intervene by saying that I was interested in what the woman had to say, yet after a period of time I became impatient and found myself stopping listening. Because I wanted to connect with the talker, I told her, I was eager for her to check with me or others on how we were hearing her. Then I asked her how she was reacting to what I had said. She told us she was relieved. She knows she talks too much and she helped me to negotiate a way for me to let her know she was losing my attention. We established that I could quietly raise my hand in front of me to alert her to my distancing from her. My framing my comment to her within the context of how I was experiencing her made for a dialogue, whereas her critic earlier had only spoken about the talker and left her own experience implicit, open to a negative interpretation. *The choice for the talker became whether she wanted to be heard, not whether she was offensive to others and must now defend herself.*

In this example I was implementing some basic issues from my understanding of Gestalt therapy. First, my aim was to befriend anew the talker in the group, to meet her in a healthy confluence. For me, healthy confluence involves each participant losing a sense of a separate self by becoming a part of a unit larger than self after each participant has become vividly particularized. Second, I set myself as an equal, not a judge of her behavior with elements of superiority embedded in judgment. I did this by revealing my inner life, by self-disclosure, when I spoke to both my wish to hear her and my turning her off when she went on too long for me to sustain my interest. I told her how I was reacting to her. Third, I asked her how she was receiving what I had said – and I was delighted to learn that she felt relieved, not offended or defensive. Fourth, my comments contained a measure of aggressiveness which paralleled that of the talker’s critic, but which was framed so that it was easier to hear. Thus, I attended not only to the talker, but also to her antagonist, and implicitly to others in the group who could see what I was modeling.

You will have noticed that several of the examples I have presented come from groups in which I was a leader or facilitator. In some sense this is cheating because the groups are not simply having everyday conversations, although they were organized around how we participate in such discourse. This is an unusual venue, I believe, and I encourage you to see about developing similar eight or ten week gatherings of local folks around discussions of political or religious or social differences. I have found a yearning in my community for such opportunities.

But changing the culture as actors in everyday life need not depend on organized groups as was illustrated in my first example from a dinner party. Even as we function in egalitarian mode as therapists or consultants, we can quicken conversation at social gatherings from our Gestalt therapy base. We do not have to come only from a privileged position. What follows here are some themes from Gestalt therapy that come readily to mind for me. You will have others as well.

One idea is to see everyday conversations as locales for *experiments in dialogue*. Gestalt therapy is experimental in its essence, and it is grounded as well in dialogue. Immediately possibilities pop up. For instance, one can particularize self and other in exchanges that take place commonly. Persons often speak to each other as if the other

could be substituted easily. They say things not tailored to what they know in particular about their friend but as if that other could be almost anybody. We can ask such a person talking to us to “Say that to me as someone unique in your life.” Or, “Are you shaping what you say according to what you know about me or might want from me specially?” Alternatively, through our self-invention, self-discovery and self-disclosure, we might delineate ourselves more fully in the eyes of the other. We often remain obscure. Along these lines we can say to our friend, “Here is how I am reacting to you right now.” Or we can ask, “How are you responding to me given what I’ve just said to you?” Colleagues who have understood my ideas about development of a distinct “I” and a distinct “You” in contacting use these ideas with me on occasion. I there refer to “four corners in contacting” which each participant must engage if full dialogue is to happen. A first corner is “This is what I want and who I am.” A second corner is “I want you to tell me what you want and who you are.” A third corner is “Tell me how you are reacting to what I have said or done,” and a fourth, obviously, is “here is how I am reacting to you.” On encounters that have been important to me, these colleagues have reminded me to fill in the missing components. And I have been made uncomfortable and also have grown by their insistence that I practice what I teach.

In such particularizing endeavors we need to be respectful of resistances to being one’s truth in an open way. One can never be sure how others will use one’s revelations and we live in a paranoid and litigious world. Yet there is considerable space for more self-disclosure and more interest in others’ personal experience. Attending to self-disclosure brings me to another theme from Gestalt therapy.

We know well the paradoxical theory of change – one must become who one is before true and useful change is possible. The other side of this insight is awareness that we cannot coercively change the other in some productive way. Of course, we can kill other persons, or oppress them, or exploit or dominate them, and change them in a destructive fashion. We have learned, however, from our democratic, egalitarian stance that the best we can do is meet the other, coming from our own truth, and we can then hope that the other will want to become different if our truth has value and be ready ourselves to become different if we find otherwise. To meet the other is to be open in



two senses – open about ourselves, as in self-disclosing, and open to being influenced by the other.

The notion of meeting the other brings me to a third theme from Gestalt therapy. Feeling close to someone else has its own problems. I am not talking about sexually transmitted diseases here. Rather, we know that spontaneous merging with another at the climax of contact means giving up one's separateness and also one's control over the relationship. There is a kind of dying in the contacting-withdrawing process in that we give up our egotism as we lose ourselves in this new, temporary unit that is larger than its component participants. As I have earlier suggested, healthy confluence is the loss of boundary of self as separate from the other. Herein is our Gestalt therapy variant to Freud's Eros-Thanatos ongoing dialectical relationship: they are antagonistic yet also mutually supportive of each other.. As the fetus grows both by the expansion (Eros), and by pruning of neurons, with cell-death facilitating that pruning (apoptosis)(Thanatos), so all growth depends upon individuation in dialectical relation with inclusiveness. It is scary to give way to such merging, and we find ways to avoid closeness just as we find ways to obscure our individuality. The experience of faulty confluence, of being dominated and submerged in the other, or too readily obscuring self while enhancing the other, may make us fearful of healthy confluence. That is, when we lose our sense of separateness without each of us being openly particularized, we become anxious at the moments of meeting when a new, larger unit is likely to appear. The loss of self is perceived as costly to the previously hurt individual. My colleagues and I noted in our study of bigotry at family gatherings, for example, that feelings of love and closeness that were uncomfortable to acknowledge lay behind many racist and sexist remarks. Fathers can tease daughters about their feminism without owning their attraction to their flowering daughters. My moderate Republican could talk with his sister-in-law both to differentiate from her and at the same time to become confluent with her in a loving way. Observing and studying resistance to closeness is an undeveloped field, and everyday conversations may be the place to start. I ask you to reflect on loving our clients in the process of psychotherapy as also raising anxiety about closeness.

Another theme from Gestalt therapy that is available to casual discourse is the value of staying with ambiguity, uncertainty and confusion until clarity in the dialogue is

reached. Ambiguity may be manifested in contrasts or contradictions between verbal and non-verbal communications, or the uncertainties may be contained in the verbal content alone. Here is a response that I remember from Isadore From that shows how one might stay with ambiguity in verbal/non-verbal communication rather than pass it by: "You are saying something sad and you are smiling. Are you aware of this?" Or, rather than asking about the person's awareness, one might note: "I am confused by what you are telling me." Very often in therapy work I have experienced someone as quite self-critical or self-abasing, yet saying this to me with a triumphant look on her face. We know this phenomenon from the discussion of self-conquest in Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, yet I have never heard any comment on it outside the therapy room. I think it fair to ask why not reflect on this more generally, not to be superior in the relation but to be more comradely.

Because all language is incomplete and ambiguous, much in verbal communication is open to uncertainty. The other night a woman with whom we were dining said to my male friend: "I'm getting to know you better the more I see you." Out of genuine curiosity about what she was thinking, I asked: "And what have you learned?" Both the woman and my friend, each of whom is happily married to another person, stumbled a bit and then changed the subject. My thought was that the woman liked something about our companion and he might have been pleased to hear that. Maybe I was encouraging too much intimacy too soon, but it may also be true that we have norms coming from our alienated lives that inhibit saying personal things to each other, especially those that are positive. I am certain that if you pay attention in everyday conversations to ambiguous comments and encourage clarity or directness, you will have many opportunities and may have more fun.

If staying with ambiguity until mutual understanding is attained or approached is one consideration in conversations, so too is the idea of finishing what is unfinished, however that may be defined. Persisting on a topic is one component of the aspiration. I persevered some at the party concerning remembrance of the Catholic priest and his prayer for the President, yet did not finish it. I brought the subject up later in another context and was moved along personally to see both more possibilities and how my projecting may have limited my vision. And I still can finish this when I next socialize

with my friend. Similarly, I did not persist when my dining companion changed the subject, which I might have done merely by observing that I had possibly gone too far. Yet the theme is useful. We often tell clients they can re-open unfinished business if they have withdrawn too soon. We can do the same outside of therapy. I am convinced that we have countless opportunities which we neglect because we have adapted to the cultural norms and do not consider that risking excitement, confusion or failure in living outside of these norms is in some degree a responsibility we can choose to assume.

Here is another example of finishing incomplete moments. We see people ask a question of someone, receive an answer and immediately go on to another topic rather than say how they have received the answer. Were they satisfied that their question had been understood? Were they happy or disturbed by the response? We have all observed reporters asking questions of politicians only to see the politicians give a speech on what they wanted to say regardless of the question posed. In Presidential debates or news conferences this is standard practice. Reporters reflect our common culture when they do not follow up with their view of the response. Thus, the practice is not only candidate and reporter; it is also us.

Joan Didion, in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, gives a significant example connected with the sudden death of her husband at the dinner table. “Nor had I noticed that the paramedics were in the apartment for forty-five minutes. I had always described it as ‘fifteen or twenty minutes.’ *If they were here that long does it mean that he was still alive?* I put this question to a doctor I knew. ‘Sometimes they’ll work that long,’ he said. It was a while before I realized that this in no way addressed the question.”

If we are to promote dialogue in everyday life, we must pay more attention to how questions are answered, how our remarks are received, how we are listened to.

Because I believe that people project onto others in unhealthy ways when their arousal level is more than they can support, I may seem contradictory when I now propose that we would do well to bring intense emotions into our daily discourse. There is little doubt in my mind that our culture fosters major unwholesome projecting. We have only to remember the Cold War, the so-called war on terrorism, and the rising fear of China as a super-power to know the extent of such projecting in our society. Yet I

would urge promoting more vitality in our usual relationships, and, accordingly, I am called upon to reconcile this seeming contradiction.

The answer resides in the conditions in which arousal takes place. The distinction I would make is between sensationalism, that arousal determined by sensory over-stimulation, the kind of arousal associated with projecting; and what I would call emotional fullness, that arousal created by the joining of a person's urges and inner subjective interests with the sensory reception of what is presenting itself in the person's surround.

Much of advertising is tilted toward over-stimulation with the aim of inducing preference rather than providing information. So, too, television differs from productions in a theater by calling less upon the imagination and thoughtfulness of the viewer. I remember comparing television and radio on this issue in the early days of my owning a TV set. Increasingly, the best movies are those one needs to talk about and figure out with friends on the way home or at work the next day. Our culture of consumerism is in part a result of a sensationalist society seen especially in young children who are targets and victims of television advertising and video games of chase and violence.

I think that our understanding of awareness in Gestalt therapy, the double-directedness of awareness, can be useful. As I have referred above to the inclusion of stimulation from one's interior, which I will define as "interocepts," alongside and integrated with stimulation from one's surrounding, one's percepts, I now point to awareness as the combining in equal measure interocepts and percepts. Racism, importantly derived from projecting, obscures interocepts and brings the person to focus on percepts primarily. We know about homophobia and anti-Semitism in the former Soviet Union as well as the racism in what was once a socialist-oriented Israel. So, too, images of the enemy have this very characteristic, whether these images arise in a capitalist or a socialist context. They are significantly projections.

Here I would like to turn to some of the historical background which supports the ideas I have put forth in this paper. One year before the Perls, Hefferline and Goodman volume, *Gestalt Therapy* appeared, another sophisticated and profound work was published that was directed to promoting a democratic world. This massive psychoanalytic work of Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson and Sanford, titled *The*

*Authoritarian Personality*, aimed to understand what made ordinary people potential fascists, what aspects of personality functioning provided an underpinning for acceptance of anti-democratic living and relating. I was very much influenced by that work and I did my master's thesis on *Religious Conventionalism and the Authoritarian Personality* under the direction of Daniel J. Levinson, one of the authors of that book.

While this research was attacked and derailed because it focused on right-wing authoritarianism and did not address left-wing authoritarianism – the Stalinist variation – it provided a powerful set of ideas that are coherent with modern Gestalt therapy, and in this day of authoritarian political and religious leaders the reappearance of these ideas may be useful. With the absence of a strong socialist presence in modern life, the days of unreflective anti-communism (what some would call knee-jerk anti-communism) may be past. Democratic and egalitarian activities, which are basic to Gestalt therapy, may be less vulnerable to charges that they are communist and therefore unacceptable. Milton Rokeach, a secondary figure in *The Authoritarian Personality* volume, attempted to overcome the left-wing bias with his work on dogmatism. He had some success, but not enough to make much difference, primarily because he focused on ideology and shunted personality theory aside. Bob Altemeyer continued the work on right-wing authoritarianism over the years and has influenced John Dean who was a major player in the Watergate affair. Dean's new book, *Conservatives without Conscience*, describes in the popular press the rampant authoritarianism in Republican politics today, which he rightly considers very dangerous to American society and to democracy.

The big notions in *The Authoritarian Personality* concerned such issues as faulty projecting, problematic introjecting, intolerance of ambiguity and ambivalence, and great fears of dependency, all of which made for ethnocentrism, racism, homophobia, sexism as played out not only in the institutions of society but in everyday discourse. In my offshoot of that massive work, for instance, different religious orientations reflected varying degrees of institutional fostering of such faulty modes of experiencing. Religious sects could be placed on a continuum from a humanistic to a fundamentalist/conventional differentiation. Was the Bible taught as the literal word of God or as a literary work concerning good and poor human relating? Were children to be indoctrinated in dogma or encouraged to find their own perspectives? What kind of higher authority was

imagined? How egalitarian were the *institutions* embodying the religion? Is the moral code rigid or more flexible? Is moral authority punitive or more respectful and open to new knowledge or understanding? I believe that it is not difficult to find these variations today with authoritarian religion, whether Christian, Jewish or Muslim, quite prominent and in my judgment not often enough talked about.

The dismissal of the argument in *The Authoritarian Personality* was founded on its concern with reactionary but not left-wing ideology. The critiques bypassed its focus on the underlying personality functioning, the disturbances of ego functioning, we would say. But this personality assessment of the readiness to become fascist is relevant today as I have been suggesting. Maybe a different approach to ideology would be useful, an orientation that recognizes that ethnocentrism, sexism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and so on, exist within left-wing groups as well as right-wing ones. The alternative to authoritarianism is democratic-egalitarianism. This was the major point of that book and was confounded by being directed only toward the right.

While the study reported in *The Authoritarian Personality* was very perceptive and powerfully diagnostic, its lodging within the psychoanalytic framework did not lead us to take actions toward shifting the balance from a more authoritarian to a more democratic culture. Overcome by the anti-communism of the Cold War, deflated by its overlooking of left-wing authoritarianism and promoted primarily in the academic sphere, the thrust of that study was diminished and very nearly vanished until its reappearance in Dean's latest book. Here, again, diagnosis without suggestions for action can lead us to helplessness and despair. It remains for us as Gestalt therapists, persons devoted to practicality and actions based on theory to revive the democratic orientation bequeathed to us by Dewey and Goodman and the other founders of Gestalt therapy as well as these psychoanalytically-oriented research scholars. I do not remember many Gestalt therapists being simply anti-communist in the heyday of McCarthyism, and I do know that Perls was a left-winger in Germany, and I believe there is a reason for our independence from knee-jerk anti-communism.

Under the umbrella of anti-communism two strands of thought were confounded. On the one hand, anti-communists opposed the authoritarianism of the so-called Socialist states led by the Soviet Union and later Red China, and it is possible that some Gestalt

therapists enlisted in this. On the other hand, under this banner, the leaders of American society conducted profound anti-democratic activities throughout the world. In Iran, for example, the CIA was involved in ousting a democratically chosen leader and in installing the Shah; in Chile we were implicated in overthrowing Allende; in Guatemala and Nicaragua we destroyed democratic regimes in the name of anti-communism; and the Vietnam war was fought in this endeavor as well, even while it appeared that the Vietnamese would have democratically chosen Ho Chi Minh as their leader. Cuba today still suffers from this orientation, and I could name many, many governments and movements that have suffered the same fate. How could this happen? How could a generally humane culture such as ours be caught up in such destructive processes? Further, are the leaders of our society so insulated that they do not reflect tendencies abroad in the land?

I suggest otherwise. In my view, leaders express the “common sense” of society’s people, as Gramsci, Italy’s democratic left-winger put it many years ago and as Thorstein Veblen, the great American social thinker, argued years before that. Leaders are understood and put in positions of power because they reflect what Sanbonmatsu called the “underlying Gestalten or perceptual structures” that are normative in any society. That is, the “common sense” in any society is what persons in everyday life include and exclude in their awareness. It is the familiar and obvious way of thinking and feeling. Hitler could not have accomplished what he did had he not personified tendencies in German culture exaggerated by profound economic distress, and had he not been supported by the German judiciary and the political leaders of his time who themselves reflected the underlying perceptual structures of that society.

I am now close to a major frustration in my political dealings since I have felt bedeviled by what I have called the anti-psychological bent of authoritarian left-wingers. The authors of *The Authoritarian Personality* referred to “anti-intracception,” and I think this quality applies to both right-wing and left-wing authoritarians.

The conception of awareness we bring from Gestalt therapy, following Freud’s early theory of consciousness, I might add, can apply to the study of ideology. I refer to the idea that awareness is of the organism/environment field. In my reading of this notion, as I have already said, awareness includes equal and integrated contributions of

interocepts and percepts. We see projecting when interocepts are diminished in awareness and conversely introjects active when perceptions of the current field are limited. Both faulty projecting and problematic introjecting are active in persons who are more ready to be fascists, and it is not difficult to detect promotion of these disturbances of ego functioning in authoritarian systems and societies.

We see some of this in American culture today, as we can remember it in the so-called Socialist societies of the past. In Russia, right after the revolution in 1917, progressive education and psychoanalysis in its radical form prospered for a short while. Gestalt therapy might well have grown there if Stalinism had not come upon the scene, resonated with the feudal and deeply religious culture existing before the revolution, and suppressed these liberating movements. The paranoia of the Soviet Union that followed led ultimately to the devastation of the society and serves as a warning to any revolution of our time.

This rumination brings me back to the theme of this paper. The culture embodied in everyday life is the ground of what ails us, and can very well be the arena in which we need to address our wisdom that comes from the consulting rooms and organizations within which we live and work. I beseech you to engage in culture change by adapting Gestalt therapy to the details of everyday discourse. The enterprise can be surprisingly exciting, challenging and productive.

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