

Gestalt and Shamanism

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When people ask me what Gestalt is, I normally tell them about its originator, Fritz Perls.

Perls (1893-1970) was a renowned German psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, who, following the first World War, researched psychotherapy and counselling methods and used them with his patients, as well as employing them for his own healing.

Perls, being born in Berlin at a time when the city had a rich bohemian community, was exposed to various artistic and avant-garde movements as he grew up. He studied under Wilhelm Reich, the radical psychoanalyst, most famous today for his 'orgone accumulators.' Reich's work greatly influenced Perls, who was also exposed to both Zen Buddhism and Chinese Tao, which were growing in popularity in Berlin at the time, thus enabling him to bring together wisdoms and spirituality from the East, into the more intellectual West.

GESTALT AND SHAMANISM

The word 'Gestalt' is a German word meaning 'pattern,' 'form' or 'constellation,' and Gestalt psychotherapy is a way of exploring the psyche in a way that merges a person's feelings, body and mind.

The therapy does this by using the patient's 'verbal dialogue' (the patient talks about what they are thinking and feeling), and also by using their 'energy dialogue' (what the patient is experiencing in their body, and how their body is responding unconsciously to the things they are talking about - such as unconscious hand gestures or body postures etc).

This makes a connection - a gestalt - between the patient's mind, emotions and body, by bringing their awareness to any blockage such as an ache, physical discomfort, mannerism or pain. These physical aspects can then be explored to see what they mean - what they are 'saying,' on behalf of the patient. **For example the patient sits with their hands over their stomach and would be asked by the therapist what her hands would say if they had an independent voice. For instance the hands could be unconsciously protecting delicate issues stored as energy around their stomach area.**

Gestalt is Holistic – which I always think of as 'doing less and being more.' It is a therapy system in which the whole self is taken into consideration, rather than say, just verbal and mental energy, which a lot of psychotherapy and counselling methods tend to focus on. In Gestalt, all a person's connections, between their mind, body and emotions, are looked at as a single unity, rather than as separate parts.

Shamanic healing also focuses on both verbal dialogue and energy blockages, and both Gestalt and shamanism are ways of healing which bring people to the centre of themselves, so that you can walk in beauty and balance and find wholeness.

By initially inquiring of the patient or client (verbal dialogue) what is going on in the 'here and now' for them, their past and-or their future can be healed.

Both shamanism and Gestalt therapy shift energy and bring awareness of things that

are holding the patient or client back. They bring to awareness the pattern we are stuck in, which no longer serves us, and enables us to let go of them, when the time is right for us. I would say that this healing takes place at the 'core' or soul level of a person.

Both shamanism and Gestalt therapy also - in differing ways - acknowledge ancestral energy blockages which need to be removed from the past and the future. Both traditions have their own ways of working with this ancestral energy, Gestalt uses a technique known as the 'empty chair' or more simply as 'chair work' to achieve this (see side panel)

WHY BOTHER TO BE HEALED

In his book 'In and Out the Garbage Pail,' Fritz Perls wrote; 'As long as the patient blocks his memories, he keeps the gestalt incomplete. If he is willing to go through the pain of his unhappiness and despair, he will come to a closure; he will come to terms with his resentments and will repair his memory, including all experiences which are not directly connected.'

This idea of the keys for healing being found within the illness itself is further developed by the Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist Carl Jung, who wrote in his book 'The Undiscovered Self', 'What our age thinks of as the 'shadow' and inferior part of the psyche contains more than something merely negative. The very fact that through self-knowledge, ie; by exploring our own souls, we come upon the instincts and their world of imagery should throw some light on the powers slumbering in the psyche, of which we are seldom aware so long as all goes well. It depends entirely on the preparedness and attitude of the conscious mind whether the irruption of these forces and the images and ideas associated with them will tend towards construction or catastrophe.'

People in distress go to counsellors, psychotherapists, shamanic practitioners and all the rest, because they have experienced trauma, shock, abuse, divorce, bereavement and all the 'horrible happenings' of life. Experiencing this distress has taken over their lives, and in some way - whether they know it or not on a conscious level - it has blocked them from moving forwards in their lives.

Some people go for healing and counselling because they feel 'all in a muddle,' fragmented, neurotic or at some form of crossroads in their life, and they need someone to hear them, validate their experiences, and perhaps reflect back to them what they are actually saying.

They may also be feeling they cannot cope with the stresses of their lives, or perhaps they are experiencing relationship problems or simply they feel lost and do not know 'who,' 'what' or 'why' they are.

This distress, although often in the foreground of the person's mind, is energetically locked away in their physical bodies too, or stored away nicely in their 'shadow,' their unconscious. The energy of undealt with distress never leaves us until we integrate and find the gestalt of ourselves, and in doing so release the distress energy trapped within us. It is not the weak that go to therapists, it is the warriors.

However, I feel I want to put what is perhaps a rather bold statement out here – most

counselling and psychotherapy keeps people stuck in their heads!

I think it does this because it only works on the levels of mind and emotion, it does not integrate the body (or soul) parts of a person, it does not form a gestalt of the parts of their essential being.

Gestalt psychotherapy and shamanic healing however, take a person's awareness further down into their body - as Perls once said: "lose your head and come into your senses."

But of course counselling and psychotherapy provides some help, even if it is only on the emotion-mind level, in a purely pharmacological based therapy system however, the patient goes to see their doctor with depression, and are only offered anti-depressants to suppress the symptoms. But Life sometimes forces us into a path of spirituality and healing, in order to wake us up.

OVERLAP IN TRADITIONS

In my view, Gestalt and shamanism have many overlaps with each other:

- Both focus on the present – the here and now - and what is affecting the client at this present moment.
- Both require a direct and genuine contact between the 'healer' and the client.
- Both require awareness to sense and observe the client's body movements and physical sensations.
- Both working with the shadow self – what is hidden in the unconscious
- Both give attention to blocked emotions
- Both exploring archetypal and ancestral energies which may be overshadowing the client. These include family patterns that no longer serve and both systems look at dis-eases which are passed down through the bloodline
- Both raise the awareness and illuminate any sensory, social or imaginatory conditions which maintain the current distress.
- Both seek to explore what is holding the client back from evolving and stepping into their personal development and growth
- Both release trapped energetic attachments.
- Both appreciate the body as the vehicle of the spirit
- Both encourage the client to learn to take responsibility for themselves.
- Both work with dreams through taking the client back to the dream to gain insight

SOUL LOSS AND THERAPY

Soul retrieval is a well known shamanic intervention, which brings back the lost soul energy split from a person due to often traumatic events in their life. By means of a the shamanic trance journey, the 'shaman' travels out into the spirit worlds and finds and collects the parts of missing soul energy, bringing them back to this physical world, and restoring them to the client's body to form a gestalt.

With Gestalt therapy, using techniques employed by Gestalt therapists, the client can also be taken back into their past, to times when they have experienced trauma which has created blocks stopping their full experience of life. These limiting blocks appear very similar to the shamanic concept of soul loss, for example both are often experienced as a feeling of low energy, depression, confusion and disassociation.

From a shamanic perspective, sometime soul loss happens because the person's soul part has been stolen or taken by an ancestral spirit - perhaps a father or mother or grandfather or mother or other member of the family tree. In Gestalt therapy there is a similar concept, only the soul loss-liked blocked energy is seen more as being caused by ancestral trauma that is passed on energetically through the family line.

In both shamanism and Gestalt therapy it is seen as important to heal the ancestral spirit, so as to bring resolution to the suffering person who has gone to see the shaman or therapist.

In shamanism there are many methods for doing this, depending on the shamanic culture and tradition, and the personal vision of the shaman, but in Gestalt therapy, the 'empty chair' method is generally used and can often be a really effective way of bringing closure to an intergenerational passed down trauma.

A GESTALT OF TRADITIONS

I use both shamanic and Gestalt methods in my practice, depending on what the client needs as I perceive it. To illustrate this here is a brief outline of some work I recently did with a couple of clients.

Jayne was raped at the age of six, and her mother left home when she was ten. Jayne has severe digestive problems, a frozen shoulder and is very timid. She is a mother of two boys and has a controlling husband. She told me she does not enjoy motherhood and feels trapped in her marriage.

When she first came to me, because of her timidness, I worked by giving her a series of energy healing sessions to start the ball rolling. These were to help her settle into working with me, and also to help by gently releasing some of her blocked energy, especially feelings of fear which I perceived she was holding in her Solar Plexus and Sacral areas.

From this, when she felt confident enough, we eventually moved on to a session using the 'empty chair method.' In this session we called in the energy of the man who raped her, and she said what she wanted to say to him.

That work naturally developed into the need to perform a shamanic soul retrieval for her, in order to bring back the soul energy she had lost due to the trauma of being raped.

When I completed the soul retrieval for her, she was given a symbol from the spirits of a favourite toy which she'd had at the time of the rape, and working with that symbol helped integrate the soul energy that had been retrieved.

The change in her, following these Gestalt and shamanic interventions was amazing, she became much more confident and began to enjoy being a mother and wife. As her power returned, her digestion improved and her frozen shoulder disappeared. Her relationship with her husband gradually got better in that the power became more even.

Another client called Sandra came to me because she felt she could not shake off her late husband's energy, who had died from liver poisoning caused by his alcoholism.

Again I used the 'empty chair method' with her, and we called in the spirit (energy)

of her late husband. Sandra told him she loved him, but did not want to 'carry' his energy any more, and that it was time to let things go.

In a following session, we did a shamanic journey, similar to a soul retrieval. Soul energy was brought back to Sandra, but this time obtained through an energetic exchange between herself and the spirit of her late husband. In this exchange, she gave back energy belonging to him, which was weighing her down, and she received energy, released by him, that he had been holding on to. This holding of parts of each other's energy was keeping them energetically linked in an unhealthy way.

After this work was completed, she made great changes in her life, reporting that she was feeling 'new and fresh.' Recently I heard she had begun training as a Yoga Teacher!

After training in Gestalt therapy, I feel that I am personally more grounded, and believe I have a better integrated in all those many aspects of myself. I think I have learned when to be child-like, have a laugh and be playful, and can do that without losing connection with the 'wise-women' within.

I spent years in a psychic development circle, and thought being 'spiritual' was about being able to contact and communicate with dead people.

Looking back, I see that giving evidence of the spiritual world may comfort people who have lost loved ones, but does not heal them of the grief and suffering they are in. Giving messages 'from the other-side' is not in itself empowering, it often leaves people hanging on for more, keeps them stuck in the past with their memories, and does not enable them to move on in the way that shamanic healing and Gestalt therapy do.

Behind the place of wounding is a place of peace and beauty.