

Fritz Perls and Gestalt Therapy

The Beginnings

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Fritz Perls, the originator of gestalt therapy, was born in Berlin in 1893. He lived in Germany, Holland, South Africa, the USA, and Canada. Psychoanalysis was his main therapeutic interest during his period in Europe. However, this was to change as his gradual disenchantment with the approach emerged. In New York in 1951 and 1952, together with Paul Goodman, Ralph Hefferline, and his wife Laura, he finally synthesized his earlier influences into a new paradigm, namely gestalt therapy. He eventually left the USA to found a gestalt community in Canada. He died shortly afterwards while presenting a workshop in Chicago in 1970.

Europe: Germany 1893–1933; Family Influences

Little is known of the family facts relating to Fritz Perls, a German Jew by birth. When he was three years of age, his family decided to move to a more fashionable neighborhood in Berlin. He referred to himself as “an obscure lower middle class Jewish boy” (Shepard, 1976, p. 1).

His mother (Amelia Rund) grew up in an Orthodox Jewish environment, while his father (Nathan Perls) was Grand Master in the Freemason Lodge. His father was quite reclusive in his habits. He had a room to which his meals were brought, and when he went out he did so alone. As a child, Fritz witnessed his father physically abusing his mother. Despite his parents’ strong religious beliefs, Perls (1972) declared, “I could not go along with this hypocrisy” (p. 59). Referring to his lack of belief in a higher power, Shepard (1976) stated, “He declared himself an atheist and remained one until the end” (p. 21). In his book *In and Out of the Garbage Pail*, Perls (1969a) proclaimed, “All religions

were man-made crudities, all philosophies were man-made fitting games. I had to take responsibility for myself" (p. 60).

Perls was the youngest of three children, two girls and one boy. His feelings for his two sisters could not have been more different, in that he loved Grete while he described Else, who later died in a concentration camp, as a clinger. Yet this observation of Else may not have been justified. Grete stated in Gaines (1979), "our sister, Else, would hang onto mother. She could not go by herself. No one knew until much later that she had congenital neo-blindness" (p. 2).

Although he hated his father's behavior, Perls considered his childhood to be a happy one. Grete and he were close companions as they played in the streets of Berlin. Swimming in the summer and ice-skating in the winter kept their young hearts joyful. The beginning of his interest in acting was encouraged in adolescence when an older neighbor, Theo Freiberg, invited him to participate in plays in their respective homes. They became a "company" (Shepard, 1976) that offered plays to neighboring communities with Theo as Director. This love of theater was further enriched when his mother took him to opera performances, while his mother's brother, Julius, brought warmth into his life.

A contradictory aspect in Perls' young life was the behavior of his uncle, Herman Staub, his mother's other brother, who Perls claimed was Germany's greatest legal theoretician. This uncle, the pride of the family, sexually abused Perls' friend, 13-year-old Lucy. Perls' (1972) words "All that facade of respectability" (p. 202) point to his disillusionment. Yet, despite his disapproval, he subsequently rationalized his own promiscuity by claiming that his uncle's behavior gave him a license for his own. Perls (1972) also recalled in his autobiography that a sentence from a lecture given by psychoanalyst Paul Federn made an impression on him, the sentence being "You cannot fuck enough" (p. 56). Yet it is worth recalling that personal responsibility for one's actions is one of the key concepts of gestalt therapy.

For someone who became famous in his adult life, his early reputation as a young scholar was poor, having failed seventh grade three times. This failure was in no small part due to his revolt against his anti-Semitic teachers. However, at age fourteen, circumstances altered his outlook when a teacher encouraged him to become involved in drama. Having already pursued drama as a child, there was a fortunate element of synchronicity in such encouragement. His participation in drama taught him the importance of the relationship between words and action.

After graduating from secondary school, Fritz began medical studies in Berlin. Due to an elongated heart, a stoop, and asthma, he was deemed to be medically unfit to serve in the German Army. However, after battles such as Verdun in 1916, where the Germans suffered 460 000 casualties, fitness standards were lowered, permitting Fritz to enlist. He served as a medical officer and experienced the horrors of trench warfare on the Western Front, including gassing. He suffered a minor head injury and also had to make hard decisions on the treatment of injured soldiers. He was promoted to sub-lieutenant in 1917. At the end of the war, he resumed his medical studies at the Frederick Wilhelm University in Berlin and qualified as a doctor in 1921. This was followed by training in psychoanalysis at

the Psychoanalytic Institutes in Berlin, Frankfurt, and Vienna. By the mid 1920s he had stopped communicating with his father.

One of the most significant events in Perls' life was his meeting in 1926 with Lore (Anglicized Laura) Posner, who later became his wife. He was successful in obtaining an assistantship with the gestalt physiological psychologist, Kurt Goldstein, at the Institute for Brain Damaged Soldiers where Laura was working. She had studied with the gestalt psychologists Kohler and Koffka at the University of Frankfurt, and with existential theologians Paul Tillich and Martin Buber.

Perls' (1972) description of his marriage in 1930 is surprising given his emphasis on self-responsibility. He commented, "At that time Lore pressed for marriage. I knew I was not the marrying type. I was not madly in love with her, but we had many interests in common and often had a good time" (p. 49). Furthermore, Laura (Gaines, 1979), referring to the description by Perls, stated, "It simply was not true. I never expected that he would marry me, or that he would marry at all. And I did not care. For more than three years before we were married I was his lover, and still I certainly did not press" (p. 8). A statement by Laura (Gaines, 1979) is particularly poignant: "I was so much in love with him, I gave everything to him, and he took it and kept on taking" (p. 20). For Perls, self-responsibility did not include fulfilling his own personal obligations.

Laura and Fritz had two children: a girl, Renate (born 1931), and a boy, Stephen (born 1935). Two years after Renate's birth, Fritz began speaking English (he was already fluent in French), although he was embarrassed by his German accent when speaking it. Fritz showered Renate with affection for the first four years of her life. He delighted in introducing her to everybody. His change in behavior, Perls (1969a) claimed, was due to being blamed for everything that went wrong – a reason that did not justify his withdrawal from a young child. His view of Renate is apparent in a statement he made in 1972, when Renate wrote to him with a picture of his grand-daughter, Leslie: "For once a letter without asking me for something, but I am sure the letter is an overture for a request that likely will come via Lore" (Perls, 1972, pp. 275–276). His son, Stephen, confirmed that Fritz did not appreciate what he called "leeching" – "Fritz was critical ... of my sister; he often felt that (she) was leeching on him" (Gaines, 1979, p. 93). His fondness for his grand-daughter, Leslie, can be seen in his description of her as a "cute and bright copperhead" with "something real about her" (Perls, 1972, p. 172). His treatment of Renate was not unlike that he displayed towards his sister, Else. Renate (Gaines, 1979) stated, "Fritz left me out of his whole life" (p. 17) – a sad conclusion for the daughter of someone who was to help so many in his lifetime.

His son, Stephen (Gaines, 1979), emerges as an even-handed and reasonable individual. His recollections give a first-hand picture of his relationship with Fritz. He stated, "My father was never angry; he was simply so busy with his own things. It was more just kind of a non-involvement that became part of my lifestyle" (p. 26). Speaking of his father's generosity, he stated, "Most of the time, Fritz was generous, but not *really*. It was a contest that we had throughout life. He was very generous with money if he were asked for it, but he would never offer it first" (pp. 109–110). Perls (1972) appeared to have no difficulty with regard to

generosity, stating that Stephen was “rather phobic and stubborn in asking and accepting any support” (p. 264). Stephen (Gaines, 1979) offered an explanation for his approach to Fritz with respect to money. He stated, “Takers annoyed him. So, by asking him for something I would wind up being a taker and he would have no respect for me” (p. 110). An interesting comment by Stephen is as telling of Laura as it is of Fritz, “Basically, I hated my father and his pompous righteousness, but he could also be loving and warm. How much my attitude was influenced by my mother’s hatred of him, how much she poisoned us children with it, I could not say” (p. 173). Yet there were good times in Stephen’s life as a young boy. Speaking of his youth in South Africa where he was born, he stated, “We took trips to the veldt area to look at the animals, or down to the ocean. But mostly I remember talking about my father, and him not being there. We had nice grass and grounds where we lived so I would bring my friends over occasionally” (p. 26). These excerpts covering some of Stephen’s thoughts portray Fritz as a non-involved parent who was generous with money when asked and whose son hated his pompousness but also saw his mother’s hatred of his father. For his part, Stephen concluded, “He is still father to me, though certainly not my image of what a father should be” (p. 275).

Having considered Fritz’s personal life, the next section will consider five main influences in the development of gestalt therapy, namely Freud, Reich, Friedlander, the gestalt school of psychology, and existentialism.

European Influences: Psychiatry, Psychology, and Psychotherapy

A large number of influences played important roles in the development of gestalt therapy. This orientation towards development was reinforced recently by Yontef (2005), who stated his preference for assimilating new possibilities into gestalt therapy, “I have not seen any framework which works better as an integrating framework for me as a psychotherapist than gestalt therapy” (p. 98). A valuable overview of the subject is Crocker’s (2005) statement that “Gestalt therapy is an example of the Aristotelian paradigm, a way of understanding that focuses upon concrete and specific individuals, situations, and events, seen in their environmental context, and attempts to understand the nature of change and how things – particularly living things – come to be as they are and to behave as they do. This is a marked contrast to the ... Platonic paradigm, which focuses on unchanging universal essences that are imperfectly exemplified in the changing world” (p. 66).

Freud

Perls met Freud for the first time in 1936 during a brief visit to Vienna from South Africa, to which he had immigrated in 1934. He described his relationship with Freud as polemic and stated in his autobiography “Freud, his theories, his influence are much too important for me. My admiration, bewilderment and vindictiveness

are very strong. I am deeply awed by his suffering and courage. I am deeply awed by how much, practically all alone he achieved with inadequate mental tools of association-psychology and mechanistically-oriented philosophy” (Perls, 1969a, p. 45).

One important assumption of psychoanalysis was that contact with a therapist could result in consciousness of feelings, experience and behavior for patients and assist them to deal with new behavior and overcome neurosis. This assumption was adopted by gestalt therapy, but with an emphasis on awareness rather than on consciousness.

Perls’ concern with the present was bolstered by Freud’s observation of transference (Naranjo, 1972). Naranjo stated “although at first the analysis of the present was a tool or a means for the interpretation of the past, many today regard the analysis of childhood events as a means toward the understanding of present dynamics” (p. 60). However, Perls viewed the present as the essential component and termed Freud’s concept of the unconscious as that of which we are unaware.

It was the difference in their view of time that differentiated Freud and Perls. For Freud, the first five years of life was paramount to subsequent personality development, while for Perls the present lived reality of individuals was the matter to which persons needed to pay attention. Yontef (1993), in contrasting the differences between gestalt therapy and psychoanalysis, referred to reality contact over transference, active presence over a blank screen, dialogue and phenomenological focusing over free association and interpretation, field theory and process over Newtonian dichotomies.

Reich

Perls trained as a psychoanalyst with Wilhelm Reich in 1931 and 1932 and was supervised by Otto Fenichel and Karen Horney. Both Horney and Reich considered that a minimum of the traditional clinical routines was desirable for an effective therapeutic relationship. Perls’ (1972) description of Horney was as “one of the few people I really trusted,” notwithstanding her words to Perls as related by him: “The only analyst that I think could get through to you would be Wilhelm Reich” (p. 49). Perls portrayed Reich as “vital, alive, rebellious” (p. 49) and “eager to discuss any situation, especially political and sexual ones.” Bowman (2005) stated that Perls was fascinated by Reich’s work, while Perls observed that “With him (Reich), the importance of facts began to fade” (p. 49).

For Reich (1949, 1969), the patient’s form of expression rather than their words was paramount. This approach was new in a field which until then had been dominated by the talking cure. Yet, we have only to reflect on the communication between mother and baby to realize that it is established in the first months of life through non-verbal means such as facial expression, movement of limbs, crying, smiling, and laughing – long before verbal interaction occurs.

Emotions, in Reich’s (1949) view, indicated a flow of body energy. He held that frustration of needs leads to a contraction of the body since people store unacceptable

emotions in their muscles and internal organs (Clarkson & Mackewn, 1993). Reich coined the term “muscular/character armouring” to refer to this tightening of muscles. Its function was to keep strong emotions such as anger, fear, or rage at bay. Non-expression can often emerge through attitudes of the family, school, or society in general, which state that you cannot express yourself.

Reich (1949) sought to relax muscles through freeing blocked emotions and energy. In order to do this, he started touching patients where tension was located and relieving it. He used his thumb or the palm of his hand to dissolve any muscular rigidity. Progress was measured by a softening of the muscles. Following Reich, Perls (1969b) stressed body sensations as an avenue to awareness in gestalt therapy. Although psychoanalysis was well developed, Reich felt that it lacked the techniques to bring about cure. He held that a relationship existed between the way people used their minds and the way that they used their bodies. Smith (1976) found several aspects of Reichian analysis in gestalt therapy, including paying attention to the body, being actively involved in therapy, working through powerful emotions, and exploring how the client felt in therapy.

In speaking of Reich, Bowman (2005) stated, “The renegade analyst who most directly contributed to gestalt therapy was assuredly Wilhelm Reich” (p. 7). What became an important tenet in gestalt therapy, namely, organismic self-regulation, first came to Perls’ notice through Reich. As Bowman pointed out, despite Reich’s initial pioneering of the area, he moved away from his emphasis on attention to the body, while Perls made it a stepping-stone in the development of gestalt therapy.

It is also of note that Reich broke away from Freud in 1930, as Reich believed that the present was more important than what had happened to a person in the past. From then onwards, he began to attend to his patient’s physical responses during therapy. Furthermore, as a psychoanalyst he had sat behind his patients, but from the late 1930s he sat next to them in order to establish greater contact with them. Reich was expelled from the Vienna Psychoanalytic Association – an ironic conclusion to his psychoanalytic involvement, where he had been mooted as the possible successor of Freud. The expulsion was a harbinger of what was to happen to Perls. For both had dared to expand the holy grail of psychoanalysis.

Friedlander

Perls (1972) paid tribute to philosopher Sigmund Friedlander, from whom he learnt the meaning of balance as “the zero-centre of opposites” (p. 70), or, using Friedlander’s (1918) terminology, as the zero point of creative indifference. Perls also referred to this point as the creative void, so named since individuals are not aware of anything concretely and are at peace with themselves and others. They are experiencing a being rather than a doing orientation to life.

In his theory of creative indifference, Friedlander (1918) held that every event is related to a zero point from which a differentiation into opposites takes place. “These opposites show in their specific context a great affinity to each other. By remaining alert in the centre, we can acquire a creative ability of seeing both sides of an occurrence and completing an incomplete half. By avoiding a one-sided

outlook, we gain a much deeper insight into the structure and functioning of the organism” (Perls, 1947, p. 15). Given the importance of balance between opposites in gestalt therapy, Perls’ recognition of Friedlander was not surprising. The subject of balance and polarities will be explored in more depth in Chapter 2.

The Gestalt School of Psychology

The gestalt school of psychology, founded by Max Wertheimer (1880–1943), was mainly concerned with perception, learning and related theories. According to Bowman (2005), the Berlin School of Gestalt Psychology (Wertheimer, Koffka, Kohler) was “revolutionary in identifying perception as a holistic process” (p. 9). The perceptual experiments of these psychologists opened the way for studies showing how motivation affects perception and still later to the therapeutic insights of Perls, who synthesized laws of simple perception first into a system of psychotherapy and further into a humanistic view of the person’s existence. According to gestalt psychology, individuals structure and impose order on their own perceptions.

Perls (1947) cited Wertheimer’s succinct formulation of gestalt theory as follows: “There are wholes, the behaviour of which is not determined by that of their individual elements, but where the part-processes are themselves determined by the intrinsic nature of the whole” (p. 27). This quotation serves to illuminate the very close connection between gestalt theory and gestalt therapy in particular when wholeness is being discussed. Heidebreder (1961) pointed out that a melody is independent of the sensory elements of which it is composed. It may be played in different keys and/or intensities while still remaining the same melody.

Wertheimer (1880–1943) criticized Wundt for explaining sensory experiences in terms of elements. Through his experiments, Wertheimer proved that individuals perceive their surroundings as a whole. Thus, the integral nature of the person was a tenet held by the gestalt psychologists. The gestalt psychologist Kurt Goldstein demonstrated this clearly through his work with brain-damaged soldiers. Injury to the brain affected not only the brain itself, but also the entire behavior of the person.

Thus, during the early part of the twentieth century, a group of experimental psychologists, called gestalt psychologists, developed theories of perception. They believed that humans perceive the world in wholes or patterns. In Chapter 2, further consideration will be given to this belief under a discussion of the concept “gestalt.”

Existentialism

The influence of existentialism on gestalt therapy is reflected in Corey’s (1985) reference to gestalt therapy as “a form of existential therapy” (p. 274). Perls frequented coffee houses with a view to becoming acquainted with the existential thinking of the time. According to Patterson (1986), “He was influenced by the existential emphasis on individual responsibility for thoughts, feelings and actions

on the immediate experience – the now, the I–Thou relationship, the what and the how rather than the why of experience and behaviour” (p. 344). These existential concepts are to this day evident in the theory and practice of gestalt therapy and will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Holland and South Africa 1933–1946: A Gradual Disillusionment with Psychoanalysis

In 1933, Fritz made his way to Amsterdam through the German–Dutch border with only one hundred marks (approximately twenty-five dollars), in his cigarette lighter, while Laura and Renate stayed with his parents in Germany. The rise to power of Hitler combined with his increasingly anti-Semitic policies led to this decision. When Laura and Renate arrived in Amsterdam, all three of them lived in an “icy apartment with below freezing temperature” (Perls, 1969a, p. 41).

The following year, as a result of a visit by Fritz to Ernest Jones in London, Perls with his wife, Laura, and their first child Renate immigrated to Johannesburg, South Africa. Two years after their arrival in South Africa, Fritz and Laura’s second child, Stephen, was born. In the same year, Fritz established the South African Institute for Psychoanalysis.

While in South Africa, a notable event occurred in Fritz’s life. In 1936, he traveled to the International Conference of Psychoanalysis in Marienbad, then in Czechoslovakia. There, he presented a paper entitled “Oral resistance” that questioned the anal stage as being the basis for resistance. Bowman (2005) commented on the paper as follows: “The Perlses’ theory of dental aggression was viewed as heresy and was summarily dismissed” (p. 7).

While attending the congress, Perls made an appointment to meet Freud. Previously, while in Vienna, he had not approached Freud, which he explained as follows: “The Master was there, somewhere in the background. To meet him would have been too presumptuous. I had not yet earned such a privilege ... In 1936, I thought I had. Was I not the mainspring for the creation of one of his institutes and did I not come 4,000 miles to attend his congress?” (Perls, 1972, p. 56). At the appointed time, Freud appeared and remained in the door-frame. Perls explained that the purpose of his visit was to present a paper at the conference and to meet Freud. The encounter lasted for only four minutes. Perls was taken aback at Freud’s first question, “When are you going back?” The encounter, although a disappointment, was a life-changing event for Perls, in that it freed him to move away from the psychoanalytical approach and to develop his own approach further. The first significant work in that direction appeared six years later in his *Ego, Hunger and Aggression* (Perls, 1947). Concepts outlined in that book included the present moment, incomplete emotions, the holistic approach, and the authentic contact of the therapist with the client. In it, he also formulated what are now referred to as retroflexion,

introjection, and projection. Although still couched in Freudian terminology, he affirmed taking responsibility for oneself and paying attention to the body.

It was not surprising that the holistic approach formed part of Perls' thinking at this time since Jan Smuts (Prime Minister of South Africa) was admired by Perls. While the word holism comes from the Greek word "holos," which means whole, the concept of holism is usually attributed to Smuts' introduction of it in his book *Holism and Evolution* (Smuts, 1926). Holism will be considered in greater detail under the heading of Gestalt in Chapter 2.

From 1942, Fritz worked for four and a half years as a psychiatrist with the South African army and was promoted to the rank of captain. During this time, he was based in the local hospital in Pretoria, thirty-five miles from Johannesburg. Ironically, he had fought for Germany in the First World War but now found himself on the opposite side due not only to his environmental location, but also to his awareness of the injustice of Nazism which had resulted in his leaving Germany in the first instance. His son, Stephen (Gaines, 1979) described his parents' view of South Africa, "From the family's standpoint South Africa was a cultural desert. Nothing going on, just dull, dead ... The Afrikaners were focusing on the blacks of Africa, and their orientation did not seem to be that much different from the Nazis and naturally that was against both my parents' views. They wanted to get out of there before they got into the same routine they had been through in Germany" (pp. 31–32).

The USA 1946–1969: The Establishment of Gestalt Therapy

Fritz went to New York via Canada in 1946 and was followed in autumn of the following year by Laura and their two children. They intended to establish a school of psychoanalysis, but the Psychoanalytical Association of New York rejected their personal approach to psychotherapy. Undaunted, they went into private practice as therapists. Fritz built on his theatre background by studying Moreno's psychodrama. Both Fritz and Laura paid attention to posture and movement. In so doing, they drew from Laura's lifelong experience in modern dance and Reichian bodywork, and her acquaintance with the Alexander technique of body work.

A ground-breaking event occurred in 1952, when Fritz, Laura, and Paul Goodman founded the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy. What has become known as the "bible of gestalt therapy," namely Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman's (1951) book *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*, had been published in the previous year. In 2005, Parlett (2005) spoke of the "continuing influence of the founding text" and went on to state, "Their text remains the starting point for any contemporary gestalt theorist. Some writers stay close to its language, concepts and theoretical priorities, whereas others stretch the original ideas in new directions and change the language. All agree that

the book was years ahead of its time in its inception of human beings in society and in pointing the way in therapy” (p. 42).

The inauguration of the Cleveland Institute for Gestalt Therapy occurred in 1954. Perls went on a tour promoting gestalt therapy by giving workshops in Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angeles, while he left the institutes in the care of Laura, Goodman, and Weisz. Eventually, he drifted apart from them and went to Miami where he spent five years (1955–1960), during which time he was active both as a trainer and therapist. He also had a two-year affair with a thirty-two-year-old woman, Marty Fromm. In his autobiography, he described her as “the most significant woman in my life” (Perls, 1972, p. 62). However, Marty broke off the affair. He then decided to go on an 18-month trip which included San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles, Israel, Germany, and Japan during which he stayed 2 months in a Japanese Zen monastery searching for satori (an awakening)!

Perls returned to the USA in December 1963 and in April 1964 was appointed consultant psychiatrist to the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, at the invitation of the writer Michael Murphy. Esalen (called after an Indian tribe who performed their rituals there) was 240 kilometers (150 miles) south of San Francisco. Sinay (1998) says “Esalen became what it would keep on being – a kind of Mecca for the new paradigms. The most brilliant representatives of the new therapies met and left their track there” (p. 64). These included Lowen, Berne, Satir, Grof, Bateson, Grindler, Bandler, and Watts. He remained in Esalen until 1969 and continued to develop the gestalt therapy approach, resulting in the publication of his third *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim* (Perls, 1969b). During his six years there, he introduced the “hot seat” and the “empty chair” (both of which will be outlined in Chapter 4) as he sought to bring a more active dimension into his work.

Canada 1969–1970: Fritz Perls' Final Days

It was at Esalen that Fritz Perls' dream of a gestalt therapy community began and at Lake Cowichan, British Columbia, in May 1969 that it materialized. Perls' time at Lake Cowichan was short. Cowichan was a small town on an inland lake fifty miles north of Victoria on Vancouver Island. In May/June 1969 he bought an old Fishermen's motel at the lake where he established a therapeutic community. Approximately thirty of his disciples from Esalen came to Cowichan, with the result that Perls felt at home there. Many of them later became leaders in the gestalt therapy international community. These included Barry Stevens, Abraham Levitsky, Stella Resnick, John Stevens, Robert Spitzer, and Patricia Baumgardner. In keeping with his personality, he had no preconception of the precise nature the community would take. “He hoped a life style would emerge which would encourage increased awareness, with each person integrating disowned parts of his personality and taking responsibility for his own state of consciousness. He wanted a centre where therapists could live and study for several months”

(Spitzer, 1973, p. x). The purpose of the community was to have a place where gestalt therapists could live and study for several months, to transcribe his films, and to give lectures. On Vancouver Island, Perls wrote the final page of his biography *In and Out of the Garbage Pail* – his fourth and final book (Perls, 1969a). He left Cowichan in December 1969 and in early 1970 went on a leisure trip to London, Paris, and Berlin, stopping in New York and Chicago on the way back to give workshops. He suffered a myocardial infarction on March 8 and died on March 14, the cause of death being pancreatic cancer. His popularity can be gauged from Shepard, who stated that during his final illness the young and the “hip” (Shepard, 1976, p. 1) would gather outside the hospital and sit on the grass.

Although Perls and Laura had not lived together for twenty-two years, she was at his side in his final days in Chicago. Their daughter, Renate, reported (Gaines, 1979) that “to this day Ma says that she never met anybody who is as interesting and intelligent as Fritz” (p. 405). Laura’s own feelings after his death are revelatory: “I am not a bitter woman. I have gotten over the mourning ... Through the years when he came and went ... and came and went, it was always another separation and another period of mourning and resentment. Now it is final. I have lived through it and I think that I am over it” (Gaines, 1979, p. 420).

Two of the many tributes to Perls are those of Patricia Baumgardner and Erving Polster. Patricia said of him, “Your gift to me endures in my body, which is warmer and quieter, and in my feelings which flow more and more clearly ... You have made possible the best ways I know for working and growing ... You gave me much of yourself. You worked with me over and over and continuously – even to telling me to get up and work when I avoided it” (Baumgardner, 1975, p. 5). Erv Polster stated “from Fritz I got the realization that a person could have an incredible range in characteristics. I could experience Fritz as the most cutting and most tender of all people. I loved the contrast” (Wysong & Rosenfeld, 1982, p. 49).

The downside of Perls’ quest for freedom was neglect of his children and his marital relationship. The wholeness that he so appreciated and supported others to find seemed to elude him. Despite this, he was a consummate professional in his work-life traveling throughout the USA, Europe, and finally Canada in order to promote the pearl of gestalt therapy while, at the same time, always seeking to increase his knowledge and taking what was relevant from others in order to expand gestalt therapy further. This was exemplified during his sabbatical when he went to Japan and became familiar with and influenced by Eastern thinking.

In summary, Fritz emerges as a skilled clinician who was daring enough to take on the orthodoxy of psychoanalysis, a move which resulted in his new creation, gestalt therapy. His ability to integrate concepts such as gestalt from other approaches which preceded this new creation established a new approach in the relatively early days of psychotherapy. His freedom of thought allowed him to move beyond the established therapeutic certainties to re-examine and take from them only what he judged to be relevant.

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