

Comparing Expressive Arts Therapy and Gestalt Therapy: A Personal Experience

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I went to Hawaii in February '04 to participate in the Expressive Arts Therapy conference. My experiences there set me to thinking about the differences between Gestalt therapy and Expressive Arts Therapy.

At that conference, I found it was easier than usual to present a singing workshop, since there was no demand to explain anything I was doing theoretically nor to consider aspects of group process nor make space for difference. I simply taught and facilitated creative experiments with voice, and got a lot of appreciation for it. The participants addressed their feedback to me and expected me, as the "expert", to respond-soothe-praiseinterpret their reports.

No-one in the room showed familiarity with or inclination to address the experience we were having together as essentially a group experience. All the focus was on the individuals and the medium being experimented with - not that the word "experiment" was used. That is a Gestalt concept and was never mentioned.

That workshop was a real ego trip for me because the experiments were creative and my workshop was judged to be a success by the participants. But for me, creative experiments cannot be the sum total of a growthful experience.

One reason I feel this way is that such an approach sets me up as a kind of guru who has the power to get people to "find"

themselves through expressive experimentation. That way they are unknowingly introjecting my being an authority over them; and that goes against my social values, in doing that, the structure of their relationship with me is usually a repetition of many past unawares structures in their lives, and is thus not essentially growthful, in my view.

At this same conference, I found most of my colleagues' workshops to be fun but ultimately not exciting for me. True, they were creative and I liked that aspect of playing - with drawing, dance, rhythm instruments, photographs. However, I found the experiences to stop short of being growth promoting because they did not pay attention to the here-and-now conditions under which we were engaging in them.

When I say the here-and-now conditions I mean 1) the group process occurring in the room at the time that we are working together, 2) my relationship with the facilitator as well as among the group members, 3) qualities of the physical environment in which we are working, 4) somatic sensations experienced throughout the workshop, 5) the ebb and flow of inner excitement and anxiety - especially support for resistances - as they occur during the workshop. So, in general, I missed attention to process while finding that there was almost exclusive attention to content (a false split, of course), the content being, in this case, the experiments and their apparent "results".

In addition, I want to disclose that I have a personal metaagenda when I teach. It is to try to make it possible for participants' self agency to become strengthened, no matter what the topic is that I am teaching about. I always believe that there is plenty of expertise in the room when it comes to understanding our human condition, and that the more of this

expertise that is expressed, the stronger all of us become together; i.e. the more the elements in the field become apparent, the more alive the field becomes for all of us.

Stating that another way, at the New York Institute we say, "Leadership is a function and not a title." We believe that, in group process functional leadership circulates among members of the group, despite one person being officially named leaderteacher- supervisor-facilitator. So, when I experienced numerous creative workshops being led professionally but without attention to group process, I felt that the whole potential experience in the room was not being utilized for growth.

So, I decided that when I found an opportunity, I would try to experiment with this question of Expressive Arts Therapy as contrasted with Gestalt therapy using arts experiments. That opportunity came in November '04 when I taught a workshop at the conference of the Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy in Florida. I named the workshop "The Song Is You". Here is how I described it in the conference brochure:

"In this workshop, I hope to bridge the practices of Gestalt therapy and creative arts therapy (in this case, singing). Creative arts therapy is rich in expressive experiments which facilitate clients' access to unawares feelings and background personal histories. Creative experimental activities are effective because they mobilize clients somatically and facilitate rich imaginative exploration. Gestalt therapy, when used as a frame for these activities, provides organizing principles for the outpouring of affect which may follow from creative exploration. Gestalt therapy theory supports the therapist in providing safety and illumination to the client's

experimental process. This workshop is for singers and non-singers. Everyone is welcome."

I divided the two-hour workshop in half, and taught the first half in the style of the Expressive Arts therapists I had observed in Hawaii. Here are some of the details of the first hour: I set up the chairs in a semicircle facing me, the leader, standing in front of them; we began without a go-round or check-in and without any self-introductions by the group members; I gave a brief talk about the power of singing to heal and inspire and said that was what we would explore that day. (By inference, I was asking them to swallow whole my idea about the power of singing rather than supporting them to explore their own experience about it. This makes the singing a thing outside of themselves which has power, rather than their experiencing their own power through the activity of singing). Then we did some listening experiments, then sound-making, then singing tones, adding movement around the room, then including visualizations and how these affected the ability to sing tones and the experiences of singing.

Participants made discoveries about their own voices which excited them. Some of them reported feeling freer and more open, some said they hadn't sung this strongly in years. Many were enthusiastic. Some smiled and nodded but said nothing. Participants addressed their comments to me and looked at me expectantly for evaluations of what they were reporting. It felt to me like "hot seat" work, the now outdated style of group work that was Fritz's method, where one person at a time relates to the leader and receives his/her "wisdom". As the leader, I experienced both of puffed-up pride in my ability to lead people to these discoveries and also loneliness of being isolated from the group.

After one hour of work, we stopped to evaluate the workshop so far. I asked the participants to say what had been valuable to them in the experience up to that point. Then I asked them how the workshop seemed different from Gestalt therapy. The first thing they said was, "We're not sitting in a circle."

Then we moved the seats, and a great 'ah-ha' occurred for us. The field felt immediately different. We felt a physical change in our bodies as the new configuration afforded our senses an opportunity to reorient to one another. I asked participants to look at each other, and to speak with each other instead of addressing themselves to me. "This feels a lot more intimate." "I feel more support." "This is scarier," were some of their comments.

As we continued exploring how we felt now, more complex reactions to the preceding voice experiments emerged, including expression of resistances, which, for us as Gestalt therapists Gestaltists, may often be the most fertile ground. These resistances were reported with comments which began "I didn't want to do the experiment because...but I was afraid to be left out"; or (To a fellow group member)"When you reported...I began to feel...but the style of the activity did not make room for sharing that with you; or "I began to feel angry when I was singing and didn't think I could find support for that, so I pushed the sensation to the background, then I began to feel nauseous"; or "I remembered listening to my mother play the piano...I became very sad...I was afraid to interrupt in the middle of the group activity to report this"; or "I wanted to stop and just observe but thought that wouldn't be allowed." We spent most of the next hour talking with each other about these reports and more that emerged through attention to our experience of group members doing this work together.

Then the group decided to try one of the voice experiments again. Much deeper experiences occurred for individuals than had the first time. The field had changed and was able to support greater risk-taking through, paradoxically, greater individuating. When we processed this later, one participant said. "The first hour I learned something about how I can use my voice. The second hour I learned something about myself and what I need in order to risk change."

In the second hour, I experienced being part of the group, where both my strong leadership style and my sense of feeling vulnerable in conducting a teaching experiment could be equally supported as aspects of the field. I liked feeling contact with the other human beings in the room, which I had not felt in the first hour when I had to act like the authority. And I liked that, in the second hour, I could continue to lead from my base of knowledge without becoming somebody's guru or introjected authority figure. This satisfied my wish to alert participants to the power of their own self-agency as supported by field experiences in group.

We ended the workshop by standing in a circle, holding hands and singing, at first all together and then individually with the encouragement of the group.