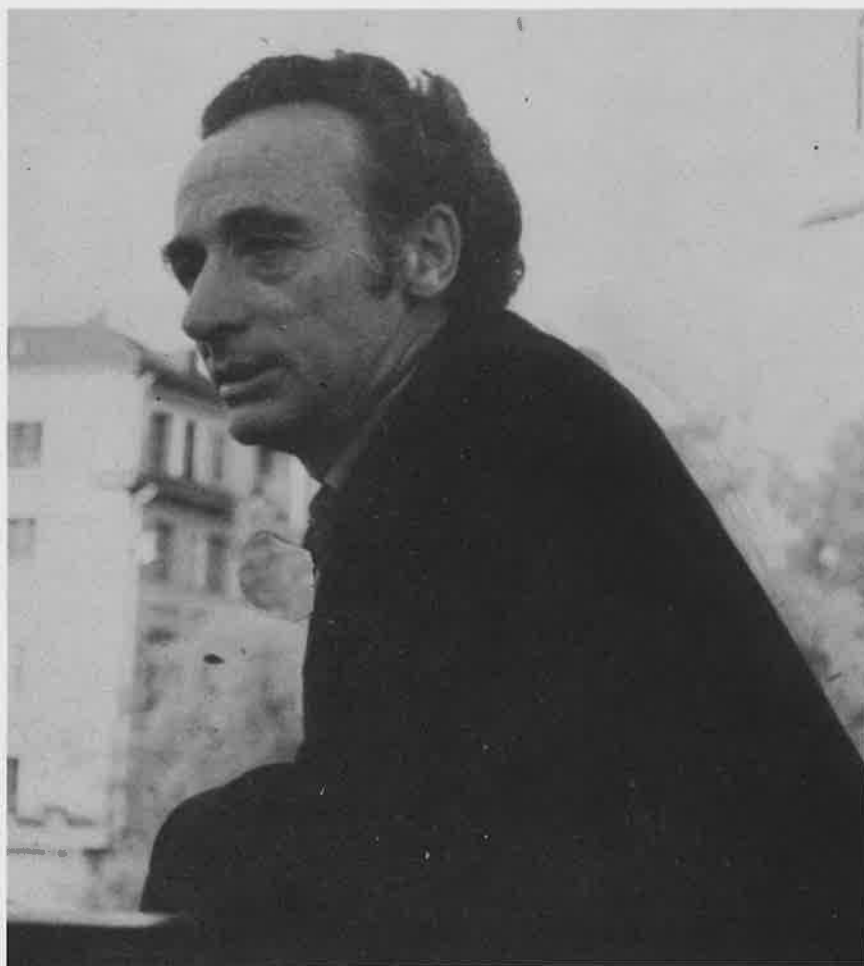




Images of Isadore



Images of Isadore

A Gathering of the Gestalt Community Dedicated the Memory of
the Dean of Gestalt Trainers, Isadore From

- Wednesday evening, April 26, 1995 -

7:00 - 8:00 Registration

8:00 - 10:30 Welcome & Cocktail Reception

- Thursday morning, April 27, 1995 -

8:30 - 9:45 Showing of the Video *Creating Gestalt Therapy with Isadore From*

9:45 - 10:15 Remarks

Hunt Cole

10:30 - 12:30 The Integrity of Isadore From

Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb

- Thursday afternoon, April 27, 1995 -

2:30 - 5:30 Embracing the Ordinary

Michael Vincent Miller

- Friday morning, April 28, 1995 -

9:00 - 11:30 The Self in Gestalt Therapy

Erving Polster and Gary Yontef

- Friday afternoon, April 28, 1995 -

2:30 - 5:00 Meeting Persons in Mundane Projections

Philip Lichtenberg

- Saturday morning, April 29, 1995 -

9:00 - 11:30 The Healing Relationship in Gestalt Therapy

Lynne Jacobs and Richard Hycner

- Saturday afternoon, April 29, 1995 -

1:30 - 2:30 Accommodation, Assimilation, and Support

Miriam Polster

3:00 - 5:00 A Dialogue on Clinical and Theoretical Issues of Interest to Conference
Participants

- Sunday morning, April 30, 1995 -

9:00 - 11:30 Remembering Isadore: A Sharing of Memories of the Dean of Gestalt
Trainers by His Students and Friends

*Coffee & tea will be served mid-morning and afternoon on Thursday, Friday and Saturday.
Coffee & tea will be served before the Sunday morning remembrance beginning at eight.*

Hunt Cole lived with Isadore From for almost thirty-five years.

Richard Hycner, Ph.D., is in private practice and is co-director of the Institute for Dialogical Psychotherapy in San Diego where he supervises the training program. He is a training faculty member at the Gestalt Training Center-San Diego. His thinking and therapy have been profoundly influenced by the creative clinical work of Erving and Miriam Polster and by Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue and Maurice Friedman's exposition of this philosophy. He is the author of *Between Person and Person*, and a number of articles on Gestalt therapy and dialogic psychotherapy. The editor and coauthor of *The Healing Relationship in Gestalt Therapy: A Dialogic/Self Psychology Approach*, he conducts training workshops internationally.

Lynne Jacobs, Ph.D., has long been interested in the relational dimension of psychotherapy, and in integrating psychoanalytic theories with humanistic theories. Both a psychoanalyst and a Gestalt therapist, she is a faculty member of the Gestalt Therapy Institute of Los Angeles (where she received her training), a member of the editorial board of *The Gestalt Journal* and on the board of directors of the Institute for Dialogical Psychotherapy in San Diego where she and Rich Hycner have collaborated for many years. She is also a member of the Institute of Contemporary Psychoanalysis in Los Angeles. She teaches at ICP, and teaches Gestalt therapists locally, nationally, and internationally and is the coauthor of *The Healing Relationship in Gestalt Therapy: A Dialogic/Self Psychology Approach*. She has a private practice in Santa Monica.

Philip Lichtenberg, Ph.D., has taught at the Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research, Bryn Mawr College, for many years. A licensed psychologist in private practice in Rosemont, Pennsylvania, he has written six books and many articles and monographs and is on the editorial board of *The Gestalt Journal*. He completed formal training in Gestalt therapy at the Gestalt Training Center-San Diego with Erving and Miriam Polster. He also studied extensively with Isadore From.

Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb, Lauria in Psicologia, was a long time close friend and professional associate of Isadore From. She is the codirector of the Istituto di Gestalt (H.C.C.) and president of the Societa' Italiana Psicoterapia Gestalt. The main editor of *Quaderni di Gestalt*, she translated and edited the Italian edition of Erving and Miriam Polster's *Gestalt Therapy Integrated*. She has contributed several articles on Gestalt therapy to professional publications including "Childbirth as Re-Birth of the Mother" which appeared in *The Gestalt Journal*.

Michael Vincent Miller, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He has taught at Stanford University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His background in Gestalt therapy includes training with Frederick Perls, Isadore From, and Erving and Miriam Polster. A member of the editorial board of *The Gestalt Journal* and a frequent contributor to its pages, he also writes regularly for the *New York Times Book Review*. He and Isadore From, shortly before Isadore's death, collaborated on a new edition of *Gestalt Therapy* by Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman now available from The Gestalt Journal Press. His book, *Intimate Terrorism: The Deterioration of Erotic Life*, has just been published by W. W. Norton.

Erving Polster, Ph.D., is codirector of The Gestalt Training Center-San Diego and is also on the clinical faculty at the University of California, San Diego, Medical School. He was a founder of the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland where he trained in Gestalt therapy with Isadore From, Paul Goodman, Frederick and Laura Perls, and Paul Weisz. On the editorial board of *The Gestalt Journal*, his books include *Every Person's Life is Worth a Novel* and most recently, *A Population of Selves*, published this month by Jossey-Bass. With his wife, Miriam, he is the coauthor of the landmark text, *Gestalt Therapy Integrated* which is dedicated to Isadore From, "Teacher and Friend."

Miriam Polster, Ph.D., is codirector of The Gestalt Training Center-San Diego, and assistant clinical professor in Department of Psychiatry, School of Medicine, at the University of California, San Diego. She received her primary training in Gestalt therapy at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland. Her trainers included Isadore From, Paul Goodman, Frederick and Laura Perls, and Paul Weisz. She is on the editorial board of *The Gestalt Journal* and contributes frequently to it and other professional journals. Her book, *Eve's Daughter's: The Forbidden Heroism of Women*, is published by Jossey-Bass. With her husband, Erving, she is the coauthor of the landmark text, *Gestalt Therapy Integrated* which is dedicated to Isadore From, "Teacher and Friend."

Gary Yontef, Ph.D., is a licensed psychologist in private practice in Santa Monica. He was formerly on the U.C.L.A. Psychology Department faculty and president of the Gestalt Therapy Institute of Los Angeles. For many years he was head of the training program at the Los Angeles Institute and continues as a faculty member. An internally known trainer of Gestalt therapy, he is a member of the editorial board of *The Gestalt Journal* and editorial advisor of the *British Gestalt Journal*. His book, *Awareness, Dialogue, and Process: Essays on Gestalt Therapy*, was published in 1993 by The Gestalt Journal Press.

ELEGANT REFLECTIONS ON ISADORE FROM

Isadore From's death on June 27, 1994 represents the end of an era for Gestalt therapy, the closing of a chapter that now spans nearly a half-century. His own contributions to Gestalt therapy are woven throughout its entire history. During the early 1950's, he joined the small circle that gathered for discussions in Frederick and Laura Perls's Manhattan apartment. Since his previous studies had been mainly in philosophy, not psychology,



he was able to give clear and definite shape to an important perception that several other members of this founding group had also begun to recognize: that the far-reaching implications of Gestalt therapy's radical split with psychoanalysis amounted to nothing less than a shift in the fundamental paradigm for understanding human conduct — a shift away from causal natural science to the phenomenology of Husserl and his successors.

From that time forward, Isadore's devotion to Gestalt therapy was unwavering. (If my use of his first name here seems an overly familiar touch, I have to add that I find it uncommonly stiff and formal to write about him using only his last name. To everyone who studied with him or cared about him for more than five minutes, he immediately became Isadore. I can't recollect having heard anyone, perhaps with the exception of a plumber or the mailman arriving at his townhouse on the upper West side, call him "Mr. From.") He continued to practice and teach Gestalt therapy in New York for more than three decades. He also traveled regularly, both throughout the United States and in Europe, especially in Germany and Italy, to conduct training and supervision groups. It would not be misleading to say that Isadore From, along with Frederick Perls, Laura Perls, and Paul Goodman, did the most to set the direction for Gestalt therapy. And Isadore's voice was at least as important as any in sustaining it. But now all those voices have been silenced.

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Among the attributes for which Isadore was revered by those who studied with him were his integrity and precision. Whether he was teaching, supervising, or doing psychotherapy, his work always had an impeccable quality: It was meticulous and lucid, although he was perfectly capable of sailing out on a wild intuitive expedition if the situation so moved him. An important part of his unusual ability to range freely yet still remain in tune with a patient's or student's

intimate concerns was that he was not one of those people who have to be right at all costs. Like a good experimental researcher, he regarded his hunches as provisional hypotheses, equally open to being confirmed or disconfirmed.

But if I were forced to try to capture the essence of Isadore's sensibility in a word, the one I would choose would be *passion*. Of course, to pick so loaded a term in our times requires careful definition. And what's more, Isadore, in his customary fashion, would have demanded that I define it carefully. Passion, after all, is in some disrepute in the modern world. In our post-romantic frame of mind, torn and ambivalent because in various ways we are still driven by the romantic ideal even when many of us seem to reject it intellectually, we tend to link passion to irrational impulses that might lead to fanaticism, obsession, or even abuse. Passion strikes the cool postmodern temperament as at once too passive and egotistical, too self-serving a surrender to internal cravings or overwhelmingly tempting external forces.

Passion, though, can also mean something much more active and concentrated, as when we speak of a passionate absorption, a passionately committed attention to and involvement with the matter at hand. Isadore From was passionate in the sense that Kierkegaard must have had in mind when he titled a book "Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing." Few people seem to have that capacity. Isadore is one of those who did, both personally and intellectually. Such passion involves a fundamental seriousness, though not the kind of seriousness that sits heavily on the soul like puritan theology. It is more like the serious playfulness that the Dutch historian J. Huizinga describes, in his wonderful book *Homo Ludens*, as a civilizing virtue. Huizinga thought that this form of profound play was the heart of culture, art, and religion. In Isadore From's practice, it was also the heart of psychotherapy.

Passion in this sense, Isadore would have explained to us, is not passive; it has considerable aggression in it. Here, too, a precise definition is required. When he spoke of aggression, he intended it to be understood in the affirmative sense that Gestalt therapy interprets aggression: as a beneficial, self-expressive, and creative human power to make something or to make something happen, to be willing to give oneself back to the world as well as to receive from the world. This is anything but the hostile warlike exercise of power over others that we generally think of as aggression nowadays. That kind of response, Isadore would point out, does not originate in freely spontaneous aggression. It is rather the symptom of bottled-up aggression, a state that causes people to crave control and certitude in their relationships. Such hostile aggression stems from fear of impotence or from greed arising out of frustrated needs.

To illustrate the positive meaning of aggression in Gestalt therapy, Isadore distinguished between *listening* to a piece of music, which he regarded as aggressive because one brought oneself, one's personality and history, to the experience, and *hearing* the music, which he thought of as a more generalized, aimless, and therefore vague taking in. The same kind of distinction holds, From maintained, between looking and seeing. Not that there is anything wrong with hearing or seeing, but people who characteristically say "I see what you mean" or "I hear you" are probably introjecting or otherwise absenting themselves from the conversation. Characteristic remarks like that are clues that alert the therapist to the need for further exploration.

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Indeed, such clues were typically the observable evidence, for Isadore, that indicates disturbances of contact. In the eager-to-please patient's lack of disagreement or unqualified praise, Isadore would suspect a characterological habit of introjecting, so he would be apt to follow up by doing what he could to elicit the patient's criticism of him, though he would probe gently at the same time to see how anxious his suggestions might make the patient. If someone used global, abstract language to describe their experience in very general terms, Isadore

explained to his students, one ought to suspect projection because such vagueness creates at the moment of contact between people a blank space that serves as a projection screen

He also liked to dissect those little linguistic intensifiers that people use automatically so that he could show how projection works in protesting too much. Which would you rather be told, he would ask a training group, "I love you" or "I *really* love you"? The second phrase ought to put one at least a little on guard, he would then propose, because the speaker may be projecting that he won't be believed, which suggests that he doubts it himself.

Similarly, Isadore would single out the sort of ritualized idiom that we tend to take for granted, like the common use of "you know" after every few sentences, to show how it reflects a hidden assumption of confluence. The "you know" takes the listener into the speaker's confidence, as though the speaker were saying, in effect, "We are so close that you can read my mind." When a person used "you know" in this manner, Isadore might reply, "No, I don't know. You are telling me," thus sharpening the difference between the two selves attempting to contact each other through talking and listening. Working to preserve differences is an important aspect of psychotherapy, according to Isadore's scheme of things. Without differences, relationships dissolve into a soup.

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Such insistence on careful, even minute distinctions was essential in Isadore From's approach to therapy. He felt that change and growth proceeded in small steps rather than dramatic breakthroughs. In this respect, he differed strongly with Frederick Perls. Patients could more readily assimilate small steps, Isadore thought, than overwhelming dramas. Moreover,

small changes can make significant differences: When you make even a slight change in an established gestalt configuration, the outcome is a new configuration.



Thus Isadore paid close attention in his work to virtually every idiosyncratic gesture or word through which one presented oneself to others; to how one sat, walked, said hello or goodbye, breathed fully or failed to; and (following what he had learned from the early writings of Reich) to all the ways in which anxiety and character deposit themselves as bodily tensions or (his own special contribution) show up as vague or evasive language. The point is that all these phenomena are observable in what is going on between the therapist and the patient. Therefore the therapist can hand

over his observations immediately for testing by the patient's experience.

This direct interplay of observation and experience was the primary meaning, in Isadore's view, of the present moment in Gestalt therapy. Drawing on fragments of tangible evidence, his interpretations or interventions — his "experiments," as he called them — frequently came across as inspired poetic leaps and syntheses. The ultimate source of his inspirations, however, was for the most part that which is immediately given and therefore easily overlooked — the obvious, so to speak. The method inherent in a psychotherapy like this could be described as practical phenomenology. In teaching it, Isadore tried to show students how to

do it for themselves. When he gave demonstrations, he would patiently take apart his observations and conclusions step by step. He had no interest in obscurity or mystification.

Despite his concern with physical presence, dream imagery, and every other kind of available cue that might be useful to the therapist, Isadore still regarded language as the consummately human act of self-expression and communication. Clear speech, in his view, was an indication of health. He was as careful with diction as a poet and with semantics as a logician. Language for Isadore meant the direct spoken idiom of the tribe, that which an influential school of twentieth-century philosophers has called "ordinary language," not the jargon, the abstract, overly elaborate terminology of social science and psychology. It is true, of course, that he taught Gestalt therapy using the terms, such as "contact boundary," "retroflexion," "confluence," and so on, through which it had differentiated itself from the ruling Freudian approaches. But then he would explain these concepts, even while he demonstrated their use, in language sufficiently simple and precise as to make their implications unmistakable. It would not be too wild a comparison to say that Isadore From was the Wittgenstein of psychotherapy.

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The principles of Gestalt therapy, unlike certain dominant trends in Western thought, refuse to break human nature down into a series of dualisms, such as consciousness and biology, inner and outer, gleaming ideal and tarnished appearance. For this reason among others, Gestalt therapy has often been compared to Zen Buddhism and other Eastern philosophies, a comparison that is not



without some merit. But the East was not the vantage point for Isadore From's vision of Gestalt therapy. He was every inch a Western humanistic thinker, and, like his friend Paul Goodman, he preferred to find the possibilities for a unified psychology within the classical Western tradition. He believed with Kant, who was perhaps first to put forward the idea in modern times, with the nineteenth-century English and German romantic poets, and with organicist thinkers like Bergson, William James, and John Dewey, that you half-create what you perceive.

This radical line of epistemology (which like so many radicalisms is also a return to something very ancient) includes the subjectivity of the knower in what is known. It surfaced toward the end of the eighteenth century in opposition to the Enlightenment emphasis that objective knowledge was the only worthwhile knowledge. What the Enlightenment had succeeded in bringing about, along with its other accomplishments, was a definitive split between the subject and the object, the mind and the body, the I and the Thou of human experience. Having thus lost its intimate connection with otherness, the self had to try to repossess it through conquest. This effort was expressed in the famous Baconian formula that knowledge, implying objective knowledge of nature, is power. Science became applied science, ushering in our technological age.

In our own century, the new epistemology was inherited by Gestalt psychologists, like Wertheimer and Koffka, who became convinced that the act of perception itself completed what was perceived; and that this was how humans made the unified wholes, characterized by form and pattern, that constituted their actual experience. A similar insistence on the subjective element in knowledge also appeared in the thought of the early phenomenological philosophers, such as Brentano and Husserl. The common denominator of these revolutions in thought, from

Kant and the romantics to the phenomenologists, was the attempt to heal the split between the subject and object, thus restoring the continuity between mind and nature that had largely been a basic premise in Western civilization from the ancient Greeks through the Middle Ages.

All these ideas formed the intellectual backdrop against which Isadore From joined forces with Frederick and Laura Perls and Paul Goodman. What distinguished their thinking was their combined realization that dualism produced not only cultural disrepair but individual neurosis. So they took a unique step: They condensed the search for unity into something immediately applicable to individual suffering — a new psychotherapy.

Frederick Perls soon went on to California to preside over the development and transmission of his own brand of Gestalt therapy, still focused on present experience but increasingly supplemented by psychodrama-like techniques to bring about cathartic emotional release. After a brief spell of working as a therapist and teaching the theory about which he had written so powerfully, Paul Goodman went on to other concerns altogether (though his social and political thought were always strongly colored by the principles of Gestalt therapy). It was left largely to Laura Perls and Isadore From to carry out the original spirit of Gestalt therapy, particularly through their teaching.

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Isadore From remained a purist about Gestalt therapy and, in this respect, a conservative (in the sense of conserving, not in the political sense) voice among its leading teachers and practitioners. In recent years, he had continually warned against the pollution of Gestalt therapy by cross-currents and tides bearing the flotsam and jetsam from numerous other approaches to psychotherapy that were springing up everywhere in the twentieth century. But he was no ideologue, though there were those who accused him of being one. His painstaking care in defining what was consistent with Gestalt therapy and what was not made no claims for its superiority to everything else; it was motivated by his persistent worry that if the distinctive features of Gestalt therapy were not rigorously differentiated from other prevalent methods and theories, Gestalt therapy would get lost in the shuffle. And indeed, the historical record has proven him to be not completely unjustified in this concern.

Perhaps he became somewhat too unyielding about accepting the benefits Gestalt therapy might gain from assimilating fresh ideas from other new therapies growing up around it. After all, he knew perfectly well, if anyone did, how eclectic the origins of Gestalt therapy had been in its mingling of psychoanalysis, Gestalt psychology, phenomenology, and existentialism with techniques drawn from body-oriented therapies and the performance arts. His growing alarm, however, came from tendencies within Gestalt therapy itself: He was perturbed that Frederick Perls's last teachings seemed aimed at producing conversion experiences — and therefore emphasized rather florid techniques but made relatively little provision for theory; that people with a smattering of training in Gestalt therapy, partly as a result of Perl's efforts, partly as a result of our therapeutic culture, were prematurely packaging it with other approaches and selling this mixture as though it were a coherent integration; that the key theoretical text — Goodman's expansive transformation of Perls's original formulations in Volume Two of the book they collaborated on with Ralph Hefferline — went out of print for several years.

Among the gifts that Isadore From has left behind for Gestalt therapy are the richest sense of its roots as well as evidence that its theory and practice form an abundant and consistent whole. He never implied that this was the end of the story; he always said that there was a great deal more work to be done. Neither did he, in fact, shut out the possibility of drawing nourishment from neighboring disciplines. It's simply that he felt, quite rightly, I think, that first Gestalt therapy has to be securely anchored in what is most insistently itself. He regarded his life work as the furthering of that aim.

As it goes on to evolve and perhaps branch out, Gestalt therapy needs, perhaps now

more than ever, to take firm hold of Isadore's legacy. This is a matter of self-preservation, like someone who slips on a stairway but grabs hold of the handrail. And not only self-preservation, for it is the best way for Gestalt therapy to stretch its horizons. After all, sound practice in Gestalt therapy, Isadore might have added, if only he were here to say it one last time, requires us to keep in mind that the most fruitful integrations come from meetings, whether of persons or of schools of thought, that have their own separate existences clearly defined.

Michael Vincent Miller
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"Elegaic Reflections on Isadore From" also appears in *Studies in Gestalt Therapy* and *The British Gestalt Journal*.



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