

In conversation

PHG, aliveness, and contact: a love story

Claire Asherson Bartram in conversation with Perry Klepner

This article is based on a conversational interview with Perry Klepner. Perry is a Gestalt therapist living in New York, a member of the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy and long-time organiser of conference process groups for IAAGT (International Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy). The last time I met him in person was at the gala night of the EAGT (European Association for Gestalt Therapy) conference in Madrid, in a house given over to conference delegates for the evening. On the third floor, tapas was served; in the basement, a sweaty, glittering disco was full of heaving Gestalt bodies. Perry was there, dancing late into the night. He is an excellent person to dance with: smiling, responsive, energetic and fun. The dance floor is a great leveller. Although Perry is older than me, he was still dancing when I left to walk back to my hotel.

Conference Process Groups

Process Groups are a Gestalt group experiment involving contact. They embody the organising principles of Gestalt therapy and apply its theory and practice in conferencing. Each group has ten to twelve members who meet throughout the conference and two facilitators who guide, support and participate. In this way there is an opportunity in the busy conference to meet, supported by the intimacy of a small group to share, reflect on and critically examine workshops, plenary presentations, and professional and personal experiences, to explore questions, emerging experience, thoughts, feelings and the meaning of the conference.

Process groups are not group therapy, or leader-led topic groups. The group is co-created by all participants, facilitation is seen as a function, not a position and leadership resides in everyone as members contribute reactions, concerns, knowledge, personal experience, mutual support and ideas.

For several years Perry has been facilitating groups, reading and discussing the theoretical section of *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*, authored by Frederick 'Fritz' Perls, Ralph Hefferline and Paul Goodman (PHG). It was first published in 1951 and in the course of our conversation Perry says that he has read it over a hundred times. I am curious to know more about this. Why is PHG so important to him and how has he managed to be keen

enough to have read it so many times? What is the interest for him and others? And what is he bringing to the Gestalt world in these groups? As we talk, the picture emerges of a man deeply engaged in a process of exploration, the experience of groups, a lover of a Gestalt spirit of aliveness and contact.

I proceed to interview Perry using Zoom. When Zoom works, it is almost as magical as the transporter in Star-Trek stories, which moves a person from one place to another in the blink of an eye ('Beam me up Scottie!'). Zoom means that Perry and I are able to converse and see each other, crossing the divide between London and New York, and it enables Perry to run his groups with members from different parts of the world. The downfall of Zoom is its reliance on technology and the variance of the internet. Contact can suddenly be lost, the image can freeze or turn dark, speech can become garbled. During my first conversation with Perry our connection crashes, and we arrange to meet a second time.

The themes of this piece have been taken from Perry's words. He talks about the value of reading and chewing over PHG. He describes how his PHG reading groups run and finally we talk together about experience and faith. Our conversation moves from description to experiencing, from confusion to clarity and contact, itself an example of the contact process elucidated in PHG.

A unitary experience

I first ask Perry why PHG is important for him now, as the texts are over seventy years old: ‘You exude enthusiasm for it. Your interest remains fresh, and you invite others to join you. You have developed a way of being involved with PHG over many years. How have you managed this?’

‘I think PHG will always be important as a historical document,’ Perry says, ‘because it is the first comprehensive statement of Gestalt therapy. I find it has exceptional qualities, providing a subtle and penetrating presentation of our experiential process with moving and inspirational themes and psychological insights. It takes a broad view of our radical approach and the psychological perspectives that organise it, explores it in various illuminating contexts of human experience, and it provokes new creative views of what psychotherapy is and how to do it. It is transformative with ideas about self, contact, field and our personal environmental field and has a unitary perspective that reformulates ideas about creativity, adjustment and the nature of human consciousness, awareness and learning. It is complex and intense, presenting a radical approach which requires active comprehending effort with a non-conceptual experience as it systematically constructs and deconstructs its psychological perspectives. I suggest the reader approach it as a contemplative meditation, to let its ideas wash over them and be digested with time.’

Perry continues, saying that our seminal Gestalt book offers a psychological examination of dichotomous human experience across commonly held perspectives that restrict our ability to achieve satisfactory living. An analysis of the book takes people on an experiential journey that includes, but is beyond, the words. In that way it differs from much theoretical writing. He says, ‘While many newer books on Gestalt therapy detail and develop its primary ideas of contact, field, phenomenal approach and philosophical ground, PHG refers to our living processes and life activity, close to Lewin’s concept of world and life space. I find [that] the experience of reading PHG is integrative and inspirational. As I continue to study it I am changed by doing so’.

Lewin’s life space

The idea of ‘life space’ or ‘psychological field’ is that an individual’s behaviour, at any time, is manifested only within the current coexisting factors. So a life space is the combination of all the factors that influences a person’s behaviour at any time ... an example of a more complex life-space concept is the idea that two people’s experience of a situation can become one when they converse together. The combined space can be ‘built up’ as the two people share more ideas and create a more complex life-space together. (Wikipedia, 2024)

I ask whether he is saying that reading PHG is a unitary activity itself?

‘You are correct,’ he says. ‘It is the same as what we do as Gestalt therapists, in that we support our clients to be aware of themselves and the world they’re in and help them to integrate that with insight and affect’. This is the case across the entire text of the theoretical section of the book ‘Reality, Human Nature, and Society’ which was mainly written by Paul Goodman. The chapters each describe contact, self and field from different perspectives. In the third chapter, ‘Mind, Body, and External World’ Goodman describes the nature of good contact, Freud and his ideas, possibilities of the contact boundary, unitary conception, and scientific adequacy. The following chapter is ‘Reality, Emergency and Evaluation’, in which he describes reality as a psychological process of organising experience. The book continues on to discuss the anthropological development of human speech, hearing and perception, and the latter chapters are on social and moral influences.

In Chapter VII ‘Verbalising and Poetry’ (Perls et al., 1951a, pp. 329–322), Goodman describes good speech as an interaction of four psychological levels of ‘speaking, thought, subvocal speech and outcries and silent awarenesses such as images and body feeling’ and that ‘in a poem ... the content, the attitude and character, and the tone and rhythm, mutually express one another, and this makes the structural unity of the poem’ (PHG, 1951, p. 322). Perry says ‘this also describes what I find reading this book, which is that the subject matter, syntax and rhythm of Goodman’s writing joins with my interests, with deeply resonant meaning and purpose.’

‘It sounds like magic when you put it that way,’ I say.

Perry responds, 'I would say that reading PHG is "magic-like" in the spontaneity and clarity with which the style and subject matter come together with insights and new awareness arising suddenly, evoking surprise and wonder with deeply felt qualities of clarity and meaning ... it is a Gestalt that comprises a new unity of experience. So, when a person says something meaningful to another person such as "I love you", the affect matters, the words matter, the whole experience is penetrating and is felt in the depths of one's being. Feelings matter, and we feel in our bodies.' He continues, 'a person can go through Gestalt therapy and integrate their experience and contact with greater acuity, feeling and insight. We know something is complete through a feeling of integrated awareness and we put that into words by saying that contact is a feeling, a thought, and a sensory, somatic experience.'

Awakening

'I think you are saying that when you read PHG, you experience something in yourself which says this feels just right,' I say.

Perry responds, 'It didn't feel "just right", it was something else. Let me explain further. When I first read PHG fifty years ago, it was saying something that I was not comprehending, but simultaneously it was touching the possibility of what could be meaningful for me. Then I studied it with Richard Kitzler and Isadore From and practised using it. I was referring to it for decades and decades.'

'I come from a background with an education that could offer limited emotional support and guidance for the complex life challenges I was encountering. At the time I knew that I was on a wrong track for myself. I was getting a divorce after being married for two years to my college sweetheart. We had been dating for five years, but it didn't take too long living together, to know that the marriage was wrong. I was working in finance on Wall Street and was depressed. I wasn't living in a manner that was interesting, exciting, or satisfying. I was in fact very unhappy.'

I ask him how he became a Gestalt therapist.

'I started investigating what the possibilities were for me to solve my difficulties,' he tells me. 'I read thirty different psychotherapy approaches looking for what might be the one for me. Then I read *Gestalt Verbatim* (Perls, 1969) and it seemed to provide important information to enable me to discern what's right for me and what's wrong for me, to learn to work with my ego

function of yes and no. I had to try seeing a therapist and I oriented myself towards one that was emphasising experience. I had previously gone to National Training Laboratories (NTL) in Bethel, Maine. They were not encounter groups, more peer support groups to help freshman students coming in. I remember the experience of those groups as being very attractive. It was then I realised that I like to work with people and that maybe psychotherapy could be something I would enjoy and find value doing.

'I saw Richard Kitzler (for therapy) and also went to meetings of the New York Institute (for Gestalt Therapy) and liked that as well. But my first orientation to Gestalt came through reading PHG, (and) wanting to learn more about Gestalt. I was not understanding it and saw that I didn't get it, but that I could go to meetings and learn through experience. Therefore, I began further study that was more meaningful. So, how I got to become a therapist was through that transition from an unhappy, young adult life to an awakening; integrating my feelings, thoughts and actions into how to live.'

National Training Laboratories

Kurt Lewin founded the National Training Laboratories Institute for Applied Behavioural Science, known as the NTL Institute, an American non-profit behavioural psychology centre, in 1947. NTL became a major influence in modern corporate training programmes, and in particular developed T-groups or training groups (also known as sensitivity training, human relations, encounter groups), which are a form of group training where participants learn about themselves through their interaction with each other. The methodology remains in place today.

Perry elaborates, 'that Gestalt therapy makes a wonderful contribution all over the world. When people encounter it, they know they're doing something that's worthwhile and pertinent to their lives. That's why it's attracted all the people it has and continues to grow and develop.'

He says that reading PHG as deeply as he does is not a prerequisite for 'doing' Gestalt therapy, that 'there are certain people who really like PHG and can grow with it ... who find it a referral resource that orientates and supports them as they work in their practices. Some of those people end up teaching PHG, but many don't.

There are many people who have found another path to Gestalt therapy which doesn't require that kind of theoretical development and who have developed their own approaches and integrations. I think this can be good Gestalt therapy if it includes the same phenomenological, experiential, experimental, field-theoretical approach that PHG develops.'

PHG and change

'Do you see quite a bit of Gestalt that looks different from that to you out there?' I ask.

'Yes,' Perry says. 'There are many different Gestalts in that every individual practitioner has their own phenomenological process and they practise the therapy differently. PHG itself presents two different approaches to Gestalt therapy in the theoretical volume and the experimental volume. The New York Institute [for Gestalt Therapy] was led by Laura Perls and Isadore From, and they always used and valued PHG. Fritz Perls practised his different version in the sixties. The Gestalt therapy field is always developing through the work of dynamic, intelligent, creative individuals.'

'It seems to me that things always have to change,' I say.

'That's right,' he says, 'change is integral to PHG, which was never meant to be the finished statement on Gestalt therapy. There's a lot that PHG does not cover at all. Goodman and Perls in their differing approaches do not discuss things we routinely consider to be necessary, such as orienting the client, couples and family work, group work and so on. People come to Gestalt therapy from different initial experiences. For example, on the West Coast Jim Simpkin was a big influence. Also, Claudio Naranjo from South America brought in a spiritual element, and he was influenced by Perls's presentations and books in the sixties.'

Perry continues, 'More recently there has been a focus on relationality. However, I would say that PHG was always relational in its emphasis on the therapist-client interactions, contact and withdrawal, with respect for the creative integrity and adjustments achieved by the client. That to me is relational; the relationship of the in-between, you and I right now. That is where meaning can be found. It is not to emphasise a prescribed relationship to achieve a cure, as some therapies do. It is the contact of the dynamic parts and wholes of the person and field, the structure of the experience of client and therapist. As the relationship between the client and therapist develops, we have understanding, we have trust, and we can risk the challenges of two

people coming together with their differing experiences of things. We can risk working on vulnerable and confused feelings, and those that are not immediately obvious. With this support, anxious fixed experiences can shift bringing new perspectives, ideas and feelings. We can examine the flow of contact and withdrawal between us and its qualities of coherence, intensity, ease, and discomforts as it happens. For example, I might say [to a client], "What's happening now? I see you are looking away and feel sad and confused as you say that".'

Incomprehensibility of PHG: confusion

'I like it when you describe coming across PHG and not understanding it. I recognise the experience of what's being said there as being hard to grasp because it's so immediate,' I say.

Perry responds, 'Not understanding PHG is a big subject. According to Isadore From, the writing was designed not to be introjected, so that you can't just read it and say, "Oh, I'm going to do Gestalt therapy!" PHG offers a challenge or a problem we cannot solve except by committing ourselves to feeling confused. If something is complicated, it involves not knowing before there can be knowing and this involves experiencing confusion. My experience of how to make sense of the book is to stay with this confusion in order for knowing to concretise and be known in our whole being; our somatic and thinking experience. What Goodman writes about in "Mind, Body and External World" is mundane, but also very complicated. Confusion and not knowing are huge areas of vulnerability and uncertainty developed in negative personal and cultural education learning experiences. People have created their own adaptational styles to manage this.'

Perry then pauses, before pointing out that 'PHG is not meant for everyone. I have had someone say to me "I've always had a pit in my stomach about PHG. I can't go near it. It nauseates me" and I say "I understand, it can make me feel that way too. Goodman and Perls are not easy people to have a conversation with besides being dead. Goodman's style can be provocative, sarcastic and difficult to comprehend." In order to understand the book, you have to have the Gestalt mentality. In order to have the Gestalt mentality you have to understand the book. These are things you have to sit with, think about and assimilate. I have found that when I read difficult passages with others, confusions transform to enlivening brightness of comprehension; as if to say "Oh, that's not so terrible".'

At this point, we lose our online connection.

Second interview

The second interview takes place a few weeks later. This time, Zoom works smoothly and our conversation deepens. By the end, it becomes an encounter between us, less of an interview, more a genuine conversation. I feel closer to Perry because of this time together.

The online reading groups, destroying the text

Perry starts the conversation by saying, ‘Part of my thought about Gestalt therapy is what Laura Perls has said; that there are as many Gestalt therapies as there are Gestalt therapists. We are talking about an experiential process where every therapist brings their phenomenology to the moment of interaction with the client, and the client brings theirs.’

I ask Perry how the online groups work.

He says, ‘There is a meeting and a developing relationship. I bring my excited, interested enthusiasm for PHG and the participants bring their interest in learning and available presence. We all bring who we’ve been, who we are, who we are becoming. Everything I do proceeds as does a process group. I have thirty years of experience organising and training people to facilitate process groups and applying what I know to studying PHG has been exciting.’

‘The groups have a structure. We start with a check-in which allows time for group participants to settle and orientate themselves to the here-and-now and coming together. In my last group for example, during check-in, people talked about how they felt in the moment and related this to whether they were completing a thesis submission, suffering because of the ravages of the Middle East war, or something to do with PHG. After the check-in, I give a review of last month’s reading. I do that spontaneously, so I might include some earlier Gestalt therapy theory material, or I might include references that relate theory and practice to the current world situation. We proceed to read PHG as a group. I’ll ask for a volunteer, and they will begin reading, and we make room for interruptions. Any feelings or thoughts that are arising for members, we take to be the background emerging so that we are processing our reading as we read. Someone might read three sentences and I’ll say, “Please let me interrupt you. I want to just elaborate on this word or this phrase.” Or someone will read ten sentences and I’ll ask, “What

are people thinking and feeling now?” Or someone else might interrupt, and say “I’m having difficulty with this sentence or this phrase, and I’m feeling distant, or interested” or “I’m confused by this”. So, we’ll discuss differences in perception and understanding.’

I ask Perry if anyone in any of his groups has critiqued PHG?

Perry says that they have discussions all the time: ‘It is strongly encouraged, and I bring my own disagreements. Things have changed. PHG was the beginning of Gestalt therapy, so it is inadequate. It provides limited or no mention of the background philosophy and the phenomenological roots upon which it was developed. Due to the challenges of explanation, language, and [it being] a new text, it can lapse into describing therapy as being done to a client rather than it being a client-therapist interaction and the description of “self” can be unclear. These instances need identification and clarification.’

I tell him that as he describes his PHG groups, I see him as someone steeped in process and the way he manages these groups is an example of that. ‘Have you ever completed the book in any of your groups?’ I ask.

Perry says that a group which began seven years ago, is now up to the second or third section of chapter fifteen and that ‘reading once a month is different from a weekly study’.

Perry continues: ‘The two volumes, “Novelty, Excitement and Growth” – principally written by Goodman – and “Mobilising the Self” – written by Perls – provide different approaches to Gestalt therapy. Perls is more experimental and self-explorative; Goodman is more theoretical and process oriented with his elaboration of a variable self and contact as a temporal sequence of contact and withdrawal.’

I share with Perry that what interests me is his description of going through the book in detail as with a fine-toothed comb, the parts-and-wholes as an experience itself. I say, ‘For example, some art aims to evoke an experience rather than be a pretty picture, like Rothko. His paintings are huge. They are coloured, fuzzy squares set in another colour. When you are up close you feel submerged in the colour, and there are no edges, you get a sense of eternity; they evoke an experience. They are not really meant to be looked at from afar.’

It seems that in your PHG groups you take people closely into the experience of the book. It's theory, but it's more than theory.'

'Can you say more about the value for contemporary practitioners in studying this book?'

Perry tells me that 'the value is that reading PHG stimulates assertive thoughtfulness in the effort of understanding its concepts, while exploring one's own feeling experience as one proceeds to read it. This approach offers conceptual as well as non-conceptual learning in an integrative and unifying experience of our phenomenological approach, of contact, feeling insight and awareness. PHG contributes to a foundation and is not independent of all the other learning we can do. Understanding PHG is not required for doing good Gestalt therapy, which is an activity of the therapist and client meeting in which, similar to an artwork, contact is created that facilitates an experiential, novel, emergent integration experience. In novel figure/background gestalt-making come things like greater elasticity of figure-ground experience and working through habituated or fixed and unaware structures, that organise experience. Assimilated theory is our knowledge and is essential, otherwise it can serve as a catch up and can be useful that way. Theory can explain what is happening but doesn't do the work. Many Gestalt therapists with an artistic and creative bent, and who struggle with theory, can do excellent Gestalt therapy.'

Perry continues, 'PHG explains that we can use theory as a guide or map. It supports a presence open to emergent feelings and thoughts, orienting towards possible inquiries and observations of what may prove meaningful. So, when you sit down with a person who is having an unclear figure/background experience and incapacitating confusion, my own phenomenal experience resonates with that person's inter-subjectivity. I have an unknowing pre-figural experience with qualities of comfort, discomfort and emerging excitements or feelings and sometimes I feel left in a dark void of confusion. Then my assimilated theory and practice training can support my available presence. In this way the theory can guide us in the contact process.'

Perry elucidates his perspective, his argument is that 'relationality was in Gestalt therapy from the beginning. Although people talk now about new ideas of being relational, somatic, or of field, these have been important to our approach from its inception. What is

wonderful is the new language and detailing of Gestalt therapy that is exciting and which enriches our work. The new directions I am referring to are the emphases on the relational field, dialogue, phenomenological inter-subjective, situational, process and somatic experiences that have flowered and been hot topics in recent decades. Perhaps the experiential emphasis of the process study-group approach I am attempting with PHG can be a contribution. In reading PHG I spend equal time on integrating what we're reading and members' here-now-next experience. I think this facilitates the learning of Gestalt therapy from PHG. This does not suit everyone's style and needs but for those who are suited to it, it can make the theory and practice comprehensible and come alive. In the groups we don't take the book as it is, we are destroying the text as we read it. As we clarify the language and contextualise the theory, we assimilate it and relate it to our therapy work. Doing this, the words and ideas feel alive and present in everyday practice. Additionally, the group provides a social learning experience that is enlivening and different from solely reading the text. I ask myself the question, how is it that I've now read this book again and again? I read it many times to begin with, before I ever studied the book with other people. Now I'm reading it line by line with different groups going through the same paragraphs and ideas over and over and I continue to find it interesting and that it excites my interest in Gestalt therapy. I don't think this is everyone's experience. If you're more cognitively involved and have a better memory than I, you might be bored with this by now. I offer this to people who find it interesting, and I don't make a negative judgement about anyone who isn't reading PHG.'

I tell Perry that I think this is possible because the book is very alive for him. I see that he has a passion and interest and loves this process and this book.

Faith in the process

I reflect that Perry is taking something that was written more than seventy years ago and rather than treating it as something to be preserved he is making the reading of it a living experience, in his groups. He sees reading PHG as worthwhile, personally gets a lot out of it and continues to be excited with it and passionate about what happens. What he is doing in his groups is what the book describes. He is facilitating a series of Process Groups through the act of reading about process as it was first conceived by Goodman. People are interested, not because he is rehashing an old theory; instead he

is bringing it alive into the present and taking it in different directions.

I proceed to ask Perry about Paul Goodman.

Perry says that he's never met Paul Goodman, but that 'he was a very smart person who could integrate and present a lot. It's strange that Perls and Goodman, who wrote the book, didn't do much more with it. They were both creative people. That's what I was saying about going over, and over, and over the book. Goodman and Perls didn't do that, they went on to do other things and Perls did his own Gestalt therapy. They didn't need to reread it.'

I tell Perry that there are phrases in PHG I find poignant that have stuck with and guided me. I share my favourite quote with him from Goodman: 'for faith is knowing, beyond awareness, that if one takes a step there will be ground underfoot: one gives oneself unhesitatingly to the act, one has faith that the background will produce the means' (Perls et al., 1951a). I tell Perry that 'I feel like this, always in at the deep end, however now I have more tools to work with than when I started as a therapist. The world is surprising, and things are new, afresh, all the time'.

I describe my own training in Gestalt to Perry, which was all about process in that most of what we did was in groups, and they were difficult groups. 'The trainers were flawed. For a while they were like gurus to us trainees. However, during that time, I watched people transform. I saw them become what we would term more authentic, more truly themselves, more vivid, passionate, and direct. This training was incredible because it was more than training to be a therapist. I find that Gestalt continues to take me towards knowing myself more and more,' I say.

Perry responds, 'I hear faith when you describe your experience in training. It sounds like it was a hard training. My interpretation is that you were in the midst of contacting, that was difficult, that could be interpreted in different ways, and you breathed, and you sat with the heat of that, you held the heat of that, you breathed and trembled. You breathed again and found you were here now and emerging to the next. That's the development of a certain kind of faith. A confidence that's existential, and experiential. It's somatic in your body. That's an important quality of our facilitating as Gestalt therapists, of our being in the process of being with the client changing, and we are changing and the client learning in that process, their own faith.'

I tell Perry of the beginning of my involvement with Process Groups, through which I came to know Perry and which I blundered into. Firstly, assisting Sean Gaffney in Amsterdam, when I was very uncertain about my ability to run groups, then being in Philadelphia being asked to facilitate one on my own. I tell him that 'my group included Karen Humphrey and Philip Lichtenberg, and I was daunted as these were people who I had heard of, famous and experienced people. Both have since died. It turned out to be a wonderful group, like that idea of faith, taking a step into the unknown, we went somewhere together, to a good place, falling in love with each other. I learned that to be a Process Group leader isn't to be a leader really, it is to hold the space for a conversation to happen, and that conversation leads to contact.'

Perry tells me that the people I named 'read PHG and grew in the crucible of the New York Institute [for Gestalt Therapy], together with Isadore From, Richard Kitzler and Laura Perls'.

I feel enlivened by our conversation, touched by Perry and happy that we are connecting in this way. The book *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* came at a time when there was change in the academic world, people wanting to break free of old traditions. The Western world was waking up after the shock of WWII. Perry Klepner keeps the flame of excitement in contact alive, through honouring this book written many years ago, carrying the inspiration it brought then, into the present. It has been a pleasure to have this conversation with him and I am touched by his dedication and passion. Our interview is an example of the process and contact he is talking about as someone deeply involved, who loves good contact, love and the process of getting there.

I tell him that I will send him what I have written. He says, 'I have faith and look forward to reading it. This has been fun'.

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Claire Asherson Bartram DPsych first came across Gestalt 1983 and qualified as a therapist in 1991. She now works in North London as therapist, supervisor and group facilitator. She has developed a strong interest in complicated family relationships, and has a doctorate focusing on mothers in stepfamilies. Claire has worked with Perry on the IAAGT Committee for Process Groups for many years and is enthusiastic about groups and their potential for deep, relational contact, learning and support.

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