



DIALOGUES AND ENCOUNTERS: FRITZ PERLS AND THE ART OF GESTALT CHAIRWORK

An Introduction to the Use of Chairwork in Clinical Practice

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“It is possible to speak with our heart directly. We can actually converse with our heart as if it were a good friend.” – Jack Kornfield, PhD¹

Fritz Perls changed my life. In 2001, I began to work with the Gestalt Chairwork technique. In an early and, for me, quite memorable case, a patient reported that he could not stand to be told what to do. Through imagery work, we made a connection to a memory of his father oppressively coaching him in tennis². The reverberations of these experiences brought up deep anger even decades later. I set up a dialogue in which he sat in one chair and imagined his father in the chair opposite. I encouraged him to “talk to” his father about those coaching experiences, to tell him how deeply distressing they had been to go through as a child, and how angry he was that his father had done that. I then invited him to switch chairs and “play” his father. As he did this, he gave voice to his Father’s concern that he learn how to play the game the “right” way. We went back and forth several times and both sides gave voice to their perspectives. We ended the dialogue and then debriefed the experience. The payoff came a week later when he returned and announced that the dialogue work had “cured” him. He said that he no longer felt a profound resistance to orders and requests and that he had been able to attend a meeting without discomfort. This would be a shift that lasted. This one-session

¹Quoted in Hooks, B. (2000). *All about love: New Visions* (p. xiv). New York: William Morrow.

² Some of the details of this case have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the patient.

“cure” set me off on a journey that I am still on over a decade later; a journey centered on exploring the healing power of dialogue and encounter.

Dr. Frederick “Fritz” Perls was the creator of Gestalt Therapy. Although he did not invent the Chairwork technique, he did develop it into a high psychotherapeutic art form during the 1960’s when he was at the Esalen Institute. While flexible in many ways, Perls had some clear beliefs about the principles underlying Gestalt therapy. He did not want patients talking “about” things; instead, if they had an issue with their mother, he wanted them to “put” their mother in the chair and speak with her directly. He also placed central importance on the “here-and-now”. This meant that he was particularly focused on present awareness and on exploring the past and the future through the use of chairs in the present. The result was that both the dead father and the unborn child could be met, embraced, and loved in the session. Perhaps influenced by Jung, Perls also believed that most people had lost access to parts of their personality and that this was at the core of much of their suffering. This damage could be reversed and a re-integration could be done using the dialogue technique. Lastly, Perls placed a strong emphasis on the existential and the importance of taking responsibility for oneself. This was made manifest in his use of the language of empowerment. Patients were strongly encouraged to say things like “I will”, “I will not” “I am deciding to...”, and “I am choosing to...” rather than using phrases like “I can’t”.

Contemporary Chairwork dialogues can be roughly divided into the internal and external. External dialogues involve issues with other people and the internal ones usually involve a rebalancing of forces within the self. For example, Dr. Marisol Bouza and Dr. Jose Barrio³ reported a case of a man in Spain who was so distraught over the death of his favorite son that he wanted to commit suicide. The therapist created a dialogue in which the father sat in one chair and imagined his deceased son in the chair opposite. First the father spoke at length about his grief and his desire to die and join his son in the afterlife. The therapist then had him switch chairs and speak from the perspective of the son. In the dialogue that ensued, the “son” told the father that he wanted the father to stay alive so that he could take care of his mother and his brothers. The father, out of love for the departed son, agreed to do this and gave up his plan to commit suicide.

In trauma work, patients have an opportunity to speak clearly, directly, forcefully, and safely to those who have hurt them. Robert and Mary Goulding, in their book *Changing Lives Through Redecision Therapy*⁴, described a dialogue process for working with interpersonal abuse. The patient begins by imagining the offending party in the opposite chair. They then clearly tell them three things. First, “This is

³ Bouza, M. F., & Barrio, J. A. E. (2000). Brief psychodrama and bereavement. In P. F. Kellerman, & M. K. Hudgins (Eds.), *Psychodrama with trauma survivors: Acting out your pain* (pp. 51-59). London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

⁴ Goulding, M. M., & Goulding, R. (1997). *Changing lives through Redecision Therapy*. New York: Grove Press.

what you did to me...” Here, they recount the story of what took place between the two of them in detail. Second, “This is how it hurt me at that time...” Now, they describe the immediate impact of the mistreatment – “I felt ashamed”, “I had the burden of a secret”, “I felt different than others”, “I was terrified”. The third step involves outlining how the abuse has manifested in their life on a more symptomatic level – “Since then, I have been plagued with depression”, “I have been getting high everyday”, “I have been cutting myself”, “I don’t trust anyone”. This is not easy work. It may take a number of sessions, and a lot of courage, for patients to be able to say these things with emotion and power. Eventually, the Gouldings will encourage the patient to declare that he or she is no longer willing to live in the shadow of the abuse and that he or she is now going to live a life in defiance of what was done to them. For example, as one of their patients said: “I can laugh and jump and dance without guilt, because my fun didn’t cause you to rape me! It was your perversity”.

In terms of internal work, decisions are one of the more classic Gestalt Chairwork dialogues. Many patients wrestle with such issues as whether to take a new job or wait until something better comes along, whether to stay in a relationship or leave, or whether to move to California or to New York. Decisions like these clearly involve the specifics of the real-world situation and the short- and long-term consequences of each path; in some cases, they may also be emblematic of a deeper

value conflict. These would include such polarities as fear and courage, safety and excitement, loyalty to the group and loyalty to one's self, and respecting tradition versus embracing innovation. Chairwork allows them to clarify their thinking and experience both the cognitive and emotional power of each side. Perls deeply believed in the transformative power of these encounters, and he repeatedly affirmed that if the therapist could arrange the dialogue so that the two sides actually heard each other, a viable and creative solution would eventually emerge from the patient.

A central focus of my work involves helping people who are wrestling with addictions or addictive behavior. With these patients, Chairwork can be particularly helpful in the area of motivation. Most people who have these problems are in a state of deep ambivalence with one or more internal parts wanting to continue the use or the behavior and one or more internal parts wanting to change or stop. Typically, they alternate between the two. These energies can, however, be clarified and rebalanced through the use of Chairwork and, as the work develops, through the use of cognitive and behavioral techniques as well. One dynamic that I have observed repeatedly is that when patients are willing and able to speak honestly from the chair that wants to continue, they say things like, "I really love using drugs. I can't imagine giving them up. I don't want to give them up." However, when they speak from the chair that embodies the part that wants to change, they almost inevitably say things like, "I really should stop" or "I really should cut back". The use of this "should"

voice may explain why so many of these attempts are unsuccessful. These patients are speaking from an inner parental or Superego perspective; a perspective that can certainly make them feel guilty, but which cannot provide the energy or foundation to sustain behavior change over the long run. To get better, they will need to speak and act from a part that “wants” to stop. This means that they will be encouraged to say things like, “This is my life. This is my future. I can see where this is going and I want something better. I want to stop.” Structurally, it is the Strong Ego, the Healthy Adult, or the Inner Leader, and not the Superego, that will be the part that leads the healing. Chairwork enables patients to speak from this place and claim ownership both of the desire to use and the desire to change. This is also significant because healing and recovery come from empowering and strengthening the part that wants to change and not from persuading the part that wants to use to do otherwise.

Perls created an extraordinarily powerful, beautiful, and effective psychotherapeutic technique and art form. It is my hope to be able to treat those who need and want to work in this way. It is also my goal to train and empower psychotherapists who find this approach compelling so that we can help spread healing and reduce the suffering of the world.

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