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## Experiences of the Gurdjieff Work & Gestalt Psychotherapy - 2004

In this essay I want to explore my experiences of Gestalt Psychotherapy and the Gurdjieff Work. I was involved in the Gurdjieff work for some fourteen years and this is an attempt to understand that experience in terms of my recently acquired psychological understanding and to see if there are any contributions that it might make to the field of Gestalt psychotherapy theory and practice.

Both are concerned at their core with how to live more and more, un-encumbered, in the here and now and with gaining self knowledge. For Gestalt it is through becoming aware of how we avoid contact, how to complete our unfinished business, how through the process or Organismic Self Regulation we can grow. The self functions through the process of figure and ground formation. (Perls et al. 1994) For the Gurdjieff it is through the use of 'attention' that the integration of the heart, head & body can take place, using 'self-remembering' and 'self-observation'. (Gurdjieff 1973)

It has been my search for freedom from my own difficulties, together with experiences of more than ordinary presence, which have been the driving forces for these explorations. So, while this is a personal review I hope to be able to distil some ideas that others will find interesting and relevant. First I'll give a brief summary of Gurdjieff's theory of man's possible development, then my experience of the Gurdjieff Work, review my experiences of Gestalt Psychotherapy and then look at how they relate and how Gestalt might be enhanced in the light of these experiences.

Gurdjieff always used 'man' as meaning mankind, and where referring to his ideas I have followed this to retain his style. He did not discriminate against women, indeed his 'disciples' were mostly women.

### Brief Summary of Gurdjieff's life.

Gurdjieff was born in Alexandropol near the Persian (Iranian) and Russia border in 1877. His second book 'Meetings with Remarkable Men' (1973) was made into a film by Peter Brook) is an autobiographical account of his early life and his search through Asia for the meaning of life. He started his 'teaching' in Russian in about 1915, leaving at the time of the revolution in 1917 and going South through many countries and many extraordinary adventures and journeys with a group his followers. Finally he ended up in France in 1922 where he set his 'Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man' in a large house and grounds in Fontainebleau. The institute had to eventually close in 1933 for financial reasons; it had started well but the pressure of keeping it going, his accident in 1924, visiting America, raising funds and copious writing, all seemed to take their toll. His dreams for his beloved institute had failed. After this he spent two years in America before returning to live and teach from his flat in Paris until he died on the 29<sup>th</sup> October 1949.

My understanding is that it was in this last period of his life that he mellowed from someone who ðknewö and could be arrogant and brutal into someone with huge humanity. This can be seen from Kathryn Hulme's account of her time with Gurdjieff before and after World War Two. (1997) From all accounts he was a ðremarkableö man, the amount he did in his life, the depth and breadth of his knowledge were extraordinary, and his presence immensely powerful.

During his life and after his death, centres trying to follow his work were set up all over the world and continue to this day.

### Very brief summary of his teaching

For brevity and relevance I have largely restricted this summary to those areas of his teaching which are more relevant to this essay. It covers very briefly only a part of his ideas.

Gurdjieff said that people are asleep, that they are automatic and mechanical with no conscience, consciousness, attention and especially no ðwillö, he was fond of absolute statements like, ðMan, such as we know him, is a machine.ö (Gurdjieff, 1973. p.72) He often used the analogy of a horse, carriage and driver. The driver is our mind, the horse our feelings and the carriage our body. The driver might know where to go but he can't communicate with the horse and he doesn't know the carriage. Only the horse and carriage can do anything, but they have their own wishes and preferences and don't take any notice of the driver, so the driver can't ðdoö anything. Let alone the possibilities that a passenger might represent. (Gurdjieff 1973, p.229)

To Gurdjieff the task of man was to become an ðobjective beingö. The starting point for this is the struggle to be independent from the level of personal like and dislike, free from the tyranny of the body and neurotic needs. ðAttentionö is the main tool for gaining this self-knowledge. Attention is the focusing of self's power, to quote from the O.E.D. ðearnest direction on the mind". With attention ðself-rememberingö becomes possible which in turn enables ðself-observationö, which leads to self knowledge and the building of an ðIö, an independent will. (Gurdjieff 1973)

Self-Remembering is a deliberate and particular form of self-consciousness, it is an awareness of ourselves, alive and present in the moment, with head, heart and body connected. He says about this that, ðIt is impossible to remember oneself. And people do not remember because they wish to live by mind alone. Yet the store of attention in the mind (like the electric charge of a battery) is very small. And other parts of the body have no wish to remember.ö (Gurdjieff 1973, p.229) He stated that the way to start this process is to connect our head and body with the use of our attention. This effort is deliberate: it is the start of ðwillö, the start of awakening from sleep, the start of becoming an ðobjective manö.

To become this ðobjective manö he must first become a ðthree brained beingö. Gurdjieff called our different parts ðbrainsö or ðcentresö or ðmachinesö and he talked about five in total, heart, head, body, instinctive and sex centre. (Ouspensky 1950, p.55) He however repeatedly referred to, and stressed that the integration of head, heart and body was the primary task of man. He talked about how this accorded with the universal ðLaw of

Three (active, passive and neutralising) through which all things proceeded. It was through integrating these parts of us that man can become conscious and could develop his will and not just be automatically driven by his associations and reactions. (Gurdjieff 1973)

Self observation is needed to see how partial we are, caught up in one part of ourselves (one brain, i.e. neurotic functioning) and how this one part can take charge at any time in an accidental and random way. This shows how we have no centre to our being. Gurdjieff says, "In each of those present here one of his inner machines is more developed than the others. There is no connection between them. Only he can be called a man without quotation marks in whom all three machines are developed. A one sided development is only harmful." (1973, p.82)

He talked about five different states of consciousness, "Ordinary sleep, ordinary waking state in which man is completely passive and at the mercy of accident, the third state in which he is a three brained being, which is the best that is ordinarily possible for man. In the fourth state he has objective consciousness and can see himself and the world as it is, objectively; he has will and can say fully, 'I AM'." (Vaysse, 1980)

To reach this fourth state there needs to be a qualitative change in a person, this requires extra and finer energy which can only be accumulated by the special work of attention and self-remembering to generate it and by preventing its loss, through ceasing to be partial (i.e. neurotic).

Gurdjieff talks about how everything in the universe is material, matter of different finenesses in the process of involution and evolution. (Scientifically we now know that matter and energy are the same thing,  $e=mc^2$ ). He talks about how it is possible to make our soul through building and refining matter in us, which can then be crystallised to permanently establish the changes in a level of being. (Gurdjieff 1973, p.209)

The fifth state is the Buddhist nirvana, the cosmic mind of Zen, the unity with God of the Sufis, the oneness of the Tao.

### My Experience of the Gurdjieff Work

I experienced something like the fourth state above when I was seventeen, I was away from home in a rented room in London while at a college studying for my A-levels. I was working hard with a lot of support from an older friend; I was reading Gurdjieff, Alan Watts and Krishnamurti. It was a disciplined existence, with meditation, studying, college, reading; all with very few distractions. I was in effect living as a three brained being and towards the end of that year I experienced a most extraordinary two weeks.

I remember most finding myself walking down towards the Aldwich on a different level of consciousness, I was free, I was aware of the wonderful interrelatedness of everything, from ideas to the lampposts in the street. I was aware that I could see the world differently from anyone else around me; it was a joyful, beautiful place where the world could only be the way it was, now.

About five years later I joined the Gurdjieff work in London. The best of this experience was around, being helped, through the presence of the various teachers, to experience being alive and present now in a profound and liberating way. The sharing of that experience with others gave that special experience of community which took away some of life's existential aloneness. I joined weekly group meetings and weekends of work, attempting to train my attention, trying to remember myself in the moment whatever we were doing. The first step was always to return to sensation in the body and to work towards maintaining that awareness as long as possible. There was also meditation through exploring and deepening sensation throughout the body.

A number of times I again had a sense of my energy building, when I was able to hold my attention on being here and now for longer periods and feel increasingly energised in being present and alive. This was especially so during one residential week, but there was always the sense of dissipation, I didn't know what to do with the energy generated in myself. I had a sense of having to waste it.

My experience of liberation was partly due, I'm sure, to a release from the pain of my underlying insecurity and sense of unacceptability. I struggled to work hard on the exercises as suggested, the extraordinarily difficult exercise of self-remembering, which gradually became a little easier over the years. But I increasingly became aware that I was just using my head to bring myself back into the here and now and couldn't move on to including my feelings in the process as Gurdjieff said was necessary. (Gurdjieff 1973) Even this connection has a power to it though, which I ended up using to bolster my insecurity, becoming somewhat arrogant and superior, my insecurity had found a suitably compensation.

Towards the end I began to feel like an injured animal, only able to go around in circles. I could not stop painful periods of depression repeatedly dominating my life, as they had done since my teenage years. I felt I was going nowhere. Gurdjieff warns in "In search of the Miraculous" that, "if the line of knowledge gets too far ahead of the line of being, if man's development goes wrong..." (Ouspensky 1969 p.64), this is what happened to me; my being was stuck, no amount of knowledge could make any difference.

#### Brief outline of my experience of Gestalt Psychotherapy

With therapy I started a very different sort of awareness work. Instead of working with my attention to connect my body and head together and find some limited presence, I was being asked to say how I felt. It took a while before I trusted my therapist enough through the dialogic process, (Yontef 1993) to open up, I let myself become aware of my insecurity and vulnerability which was such a relief. Yontef summed up my experience, "Awareness without systematic exploration is not ordinarily sufficient to develop insight. Therefore, Gestalt therapy uses focused awareness and experimentation to achieve insight." (1993, p.129) This was a new type of insight to me, very different from the slow process of self-observation and insight in the work, Gestalt was dynamic in contrast.

Perls, Hefferline & Goodman make clear, "the achievement of a strong gestalt is itself the cure, for the figure of contact is not a sign of, but is itself the creative integration of

experience. (1994, p.8). After this initial phase of therapy I was changed, yes, but not cured. Freed from at least some of the effort of maintaining my neurotic defence to the world and I found it astonishing to discover my feelings and to start to understand the reasons for me being the way I was.

One of things I've come to really appreciate about Gestalt is its phenomenology, the task of just trying to see what's there. Des Kennedy describes it, "It is the chastening beauty of phenomenology that it requires me to return *constantly* to the phenomena" (BGJ 2003). Starting to look inside to see what was there and allowing it to be, has been wonderfully liberating, as was being understood. I had been so accustomed in the Gurdjieff work to look for what I ought to find. Becoming aware of feeling vulnerable was a real pleasure. At some level though, I was still using my habits with attention to give me the power of head and body together, to defend myself, to maintain some sense of superiority and control.

Starting my Gestalt psychotherapy training, meant that I had to look at myself again, I became part of a training group and a new area of challenge emerged for me. All my interpersonal difficulties from my early life came to the fore and brought up more unavoidable insecurities. I had to attend to deepening levels of the un-addressed pain of unacceptability I had introjected as a child with its attendant shame (BGJ Vol. 4, No2). I soon saw that retroreflection was one my chief modification to contact and I'm still working through this, but feeling stronger as I move into being more fluent and aggressive in getting the contact I need. (Perls et al, 1994) I've still much to learn about my boundaries, especially, "I'm enough non-permeability to maintain autonomy and keep out the toxic." (Yontef 1993 p.207)

So I feel now that I am arriving at a place where I can start to be more myself. After years of slowly facing many of my introjects, imperatives about how I should and ought to be, facing the pain attached to seeing each of them, (Perls et. al 1994) I am much closer to being able to look inside myself and see and accept what's there. I no longer feel so caught by the need to adjust myself to be acceptable. As Perls et al. put it "In its trial and conflicts the self is coming to be in a way that did not exist before. In contactful experience the self, alienating its safe structures, risks this leap and identifies with the growing self" (1994 p.246)

### Making sense of these experiences

I think that for many of us the intensity of the religious or transpersonal experiences is a projective expression of neurotic need. There is the real experience of something which intimates at, or gives the promise of, freedom from long held personal nightmares. This then gets identified with, in a confluent way, with a resulting preciousness and defensiveness, such as "this is the only way" or "the true way", which if held onto restricts the possibilities for further psychological growth. I don't think that the Gurdjieff work is an exception to this and I'm sure that my experience was not an isolated case.

Gurdjieff talked about the special "subjective work" that each person needed to do to make the connections between his centres, saying, "it cannot be arrived at once, not until a man is thoroughly analysed and pulled to pieces, not until one has probed as far as grandmotherhood". There are certain subjective and there are general methods.

(Gurdjieff 1973, p.231) In my experience of the Gurdjieff work there is no one doing this sort of 'work', only the 'general methods' are being used.

I think in this way Gestalt offers a modern and practical way to reach the 'third state' of man. It deals directly with our fixed neurotic structures, is able to explore the structure of the person, the physical, emotional and intellectual and their interconnectedness. It makes conscious the unaware needs and motivations, provides knowledge of how we hold ourselves fixed and defended, is able to resolve the conflicts that hold these repetitive patterns that Gurdjieff was so aware of needing to change. It knows how to bring into awareness our interruptions to contact, how to help the person explore these through the appropriate support or challenge and thus facilitate change. (Perls et al. 1994) Greater freedom from having attended to inner contradictions makes possible a more cohesive and directed person, more able to do.

Gestalt is a beautifully practical way to do the work needed on the emotional centre. When done the driver can understand and communicate with the horse, as well as opening up some of the mysteries of the carriage, although there are plenty of other therapies specialising in bodywork.

#### Thoughts on what Gestalt might gain by incorporating these experiences

Perls et al. and much of the Gestalt literature has implicit in it the relationship between heart and head and body and how they make up the whole person but I couldn't find anywhere where that is made explicit. Doing so may open a number of possibilities, both theoretical and clinical.

The clinical possibility of being clearer about how people's interruptions to contact are related to the dominance of either the head or heart would be useful. In my experience it is possible to see clients as falling into these two groups. Those who use their heads to control the repressed parts of themselves, weaving stories and explanations around their difficulties; and how they need help to look inside to accept their feelings. Those dominated by their heart who seem hardly be able to contain their feelings with the resulting anxiety and distress. For them to explore their repressions they may need to develop a stronger cognitive structure to hold them.

The theoretical possibilities leads me to the question of what Gestalt sees about life after therapy, Perls et al. say, continuing from the quote above 'the self identifies with the growing self, gives it its service and knowledge, and at the moment of achievement stands out of the way.' (Perls et al. 1994 p246) I understand this as referring to the Taoist idea of standing out of the way of our usual dualism into just being.

This dualism which represents the un-integrated person comes from the 'split' in the self that Perls et al. discuss, 'The introject may have two fates: either it is a painful foreign matter in the body and is vomited forth (a kind of annihilation); or the self partly identifies with the introject, represses the pain, seeks to annihilate part of the self - but since the rejection is ineradicable, there is a permanent clinch, a neurotic splitting.' (1994 p.121) With integration comes presence, which makes possible contact in a fuller, more complete way. Instead of contact between parts, it is these 'splits' which cause the 'centres' to be maintained as separate, there is the possibility of a fuller more

meaningful contact. This is the heart of Gestalt therapy and I feel that after going through much exploration of my own repressed pain I am starting to deal with the whole of me again, however tentatively.

Gestalt seems to me to provide such a wonderful base for living and understanding ourselves; its elegant and simple emphasis on what is, its objectivity (in the phenomenological sense), its insistence on here and now awareness; its insight into life as process and field perspective of being of the field (Yontef 1993 p303), being inextricably part of and interrelated with, the world. Opening to the process of organismic self regulation and how our self forms our figures and grounds, and how the resulting contact is what we need for growth. (Perls et al. 1994) This leads onto the Paradoxical Theory of Change which shows how change occurs by contacting who and what we are in the present, rather than by any attempt to change ourselves directly. (Beisser 1970)

This aspect of Gestalt I love, that we are an ongoing process with real wisdom inside us as our guide, who knows how and what the end of this process might be? I agree with John Wheway says in his article on Spirituality and Selfhood, " - that change occurs when what is present is fully lived. That, if taken on, is another way to enlightenment. (BGJ Vol8 No2, p.123) I was very much taken by what he was saying in this article, in many ways his experiences had been similar to mine. For him the direction he finally comes to seems to be a Taoist one of stepping aside, " that we are breathed, and that is the most fundamental thing. (BGJ p.128)

I agree with John Wheway and Naranjo and others that the basic awareness of oneself is at the start of a continuum of transpersonal experience that goes through insight, understanding, awareness of being to being a meaningful part of the universe. Again as John Wheway describes, "In this way, I see the process of transpersonal development as continuous with the ordinary work of therapy, in that throughout, what is sought is integration of splitting and fragmentation brought about by primal wounding. (BGJ p.123)

But what if there are other levels of existence or states of being that are achievable, as Gurdjieff states and as myriads of other people's transpersonal experiences point towards? Then surely it would be responsible of Gestalt to acknowledge that and investigate and present some sort of map(s) for these further possibilities. If not then to make clear how it understands these experiences. An awareness of these transpersonal experiences and possibilities would be very useful in illuminating those experiences which people have and which much of Gestalt ignores at present. Acknowledging, and helping some people to contact a different quality of presence could also be very useful support for the difficult therapeutic work that may need doing.

Gurdjieff's system understands and clarifies the different levels of being that are possible for man. Some rare people demonstrate these different qualities of presence that are the hallmark of psychological freedom. We respond to these people in a universal way, with awe, love and respect. Gestalt knows about the power and importance of the here & now and yet doesn't seem to be clear how this exists on different levels. The experience of presence that comes from the end of a contactful period of therapy group work, say over a weekend is special. There can be a depth to the contact between people, and an openness which points to these possibilities.

This leads me back thinking about Gurdjieff's 'five states'. Jean Vaysse describes the third one as, 'Three qualities also belong to this state: permanent self-consciousness, free attention and independent will. From these three together there results a permanent presence to oneself which confers on man in this state an individuality which he did not possess until then, and a personal sense of responsibility' (J.Vaysse 1980 p.63)

Vaysse goes on to describe the fourth state possible for man, 'We have no idea at all of what this state actually is. We may know that it is connected with the functioning of the higher intellectual centre and with the growth of a third body, the spiritual body. We may know that it includes a state of universal presence, objective Knowledge, and a feeling of universal being and the powers for their manifestation, a level of consciousness, attention and creative will of which ordinary man can have no conception. Only one who has reached the state of self-consciousness (third state) can have flashes of the state of objective consciousness' (J.Vaysse 1980 p.64)

Gurdjieff says that the 'fourth state' needs a different type of energy. This work can only be done in 'schools' (Gurdjieff 1973), the generation of this energy / matter, the development of the necessary being, needs particular types of self-aware work on oneself, with much environmental support and meditation. I think Gurdjieff talks about this in his third book,

'And so, if you really wish to have in yourself that which alone can distinguish a man from an ordinary animal, that is to say, if you wish to be really such a one to whom Great Nature has given the possibility with the desire, that is, with a desire issuing from all the three separate spiritualised parts (heart, head and body) and with the conscious striving to transform yourself into so to say 'cultivated soil' for the germination and growth of that upon which lay the hopes and expectations of the CREATOR OF EVERYTHING EXISTING, then you must always and in everything, struggling with the weaknesses that are in you according to law, attain at any cost, first of all, an all-round understanding, and then the practical realization in your presence, of this just elucidated by me, in order to have the chance for a conscious crystallizing in yourself of the data still engendering the three mentioned impulses which must be present obligatorily in the common presence of every man who has the right to call himself a GODLIKE CREATURE.' (Gurdjieff 1981, p.115) (my brackets)

I quoted this in length to give a flavour of how he writes.

So, with the end of therapy in sight I think it's possible to get a tantalising glimpse of the distant hills of the human psyche. This makes it exciting and motivating to explore further.

To summarise -

Perls and Gurdjieff were surprising similar personalities. Perls said we are full of shit, Gurdjieff that we are machines. Both loved to arrogantly spell out what the problems with man were, and take the position that they 'knew' and those around them didn't, both were at times ruthless and humiliating to those near them in the 'service of

growth. As I understand it Perls' vision for Gestalt was in the direction of seeing how it could be the new Zen, a real way for our modern age to find the whole of ourselves, in a direct, grounded and practical way. Within Gurdjieff's ideas this the essential first stage of the extraordinary possibilities that man is capable of reaching.

I think that Gestalt would benefit from making more explicit how the process of healing and the development of presence has to do with integrating our heart, head and body. Understanding more clearly how making conscious connections between these parts of us can change our experience of being and how this can lead to the further possibilities of growth. To me Gestalt would benefit from incorporating an acceptance of these more presence orientated experiences more into its mainstream for both theoretical and clinical reasons.

Writing this essay has been a journey for me. When I started I was aware that I was writing about things I was not really in touch with and over the couple of months of working on it I've gone through a process of re-finding my presence anew. It feels like a journey I needed to make at this time.

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