

Gaie Houston

GESTALT COUNSELLING

in a nutshell

COUNSELLING IN A NUTSHELL SERIES: Edited by Windy Dryden



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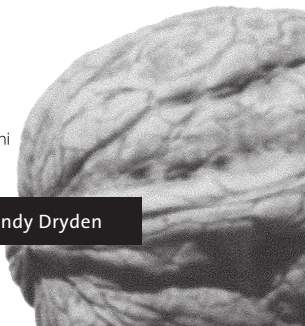
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This book is gratefully dedicated to all the supervisees who over the years have shared their knowledge and experience with me, and given me much of the material for the highly edited case vignettes throughout this book.

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About the Author

Gaie Houston Dip. A.B.Sc., has a degree in English literature from Oxford University, and had her first training in gestalt in the United States. She has taught and practised gestalt therapy and organisational behaviour in London since the 1970s, and currently in many places outside the UK. She has written 18 radio plays broadcast by the BBC, and more recently has directed operas in this country and Italy. She has written a number of books on gestalt, group behaviour, supervision and integrative therapy. She is currently Emeritus Adviser to The Gestalt Centre, London, and on the editorial board of three gestalt journals. She sees global warming as the most urgent issue for everyone now.

Foreword

This book sets out to be an account of gestalt therapy theory and practice. Over the years and in different cultures, there has inevitably been Darwinian change and development in both these areas. Though emphases have changed in different trainings and countries, a core of assumptions and methods persist. These I hope to describe here, with reference to a number of the many other variations that are current. In this short account I have quoted few writers, and of necessity left out the names of many of the worldwide contributors to the evolution of this still under-researched but undeniably effective form of psychotherapy.

As quoted more than once in the following chapters, Laura Perls, one of the co-founders of gestalt therapy, said that every new patient requires a new therapy. The best I would hope from your reading this is that you feel well informed about this optimistic and co-operative form of psychotherapy. If you are a practitioner, I hope you will be empowered to respond, within a clear theoretical discipline, yet freely and creatively, to your clients, and so create another new therapy. In this way gestalt can continue to encourage excitement and growth, and what the Buddhists term 'right living', in all parties to it.

ONE

Human Nature and Gestalt

Note: *There will be many references in this book to what is properly called gestalt therapy theory. As this phrase is cumbersome, I will generally shorten it to just the word gestalt.*

'When will you, at last, become that which you truly are?' Maria Theresa of Austria [in a letter to her daughter Marie Antoinette twenty years before the guillotine came down].

Most of us have some notion of that which we truly are. Plato saw this as an aspiration, an ideal that could never be fulfilled, but which showed a direction to aspire to. Somewhere in every counsellor, whether it is overt or not, is a belief about what we call human nature. In fact it is rare indeed for anyone to be without various convictions about what we are really like, or what makes us tick. It is one which has to be the starting place for all therapy, the more because different people have different assumptions about what makes us behave as we do. So we can begin by reminding ourselves, by raising our awareness, of some of these different beliefs, all immensely powerful in how they shape people's behaviour.

Fritz Perls, influenced by his wife Laura, and the first writer about gestalt therapy, said, 'Man seems to be born with a sense of social and psychological balance as acute as his sense of physical balance' (1978: 27). He was a psychoanalyst whose first book, *Ego, Hunger and Aggression*, was subtitled *A Revision of Freud's Theories* (1969[1947]). This revision was in some instances a rebellion; in other parts it supported some of Freud's method and insights. And he searched for an improvement to the theories already there, even calling gestalt 'the psychology of the obvious'.

And he embraced ideas from many sources in Eastern and Western thinking, taking them further, into his powerful and optimistic view of human nature. Rather than offer the gestalt therapy view straightaway, we can look very briefly at some of the many others.

Religions can seem the authorities on the subject, and all religions that I have heard of provide their own answers to this question. For Buddhists we are creatures condemned to recurrent life on this earth, in various forms, depending on how virtuously we live each of these lives, until we achieve the highest good. Christianity contains a story of self-sacrifice for the general good, and a list of socially useful prohibitions, intended to promote acceptable behaviour. As in many religions, these advocate social awareness and responsibility. They have needed to do this, supposedly, because they originated in times and places where there was plenty of the opposite.

Psychology is a formalisation of this study of what we do and what makes us do it. It is a study with which humans have no doubt been busy since they could first string concepts together, and which most of us embroider, as we try to account for our own or other people's behaviour. Unlike many religions, professional psychologists study behaviour and motivation as it occurs, rather than saying what everyone ought to be doing. They look at what does happen or seems to happen, rather than what ought to happen.

We are all psychologists. We all study behaviour and have our personal theories of human nature. He's trying to wind you up. She doesn't know what she's doing. You can't trust women. You can think of dozens of confident statements like this. Philosophers from ancient times have written theories of human nature, often with some prompts about how to be good, virtuous, the right kind of person. They evidently felt the urge to add morality to psychology. In ancient Greece there was a long study of virtue, and the virtuous man. Women were not always an important part of this ethos. Neither were slaves. On the other hand, homosexuality and pederasty were accepted, and heterosexuality sometimes seen as a necessary evil. Here is just one example of how human nature is quite differently construed at different times and in different places. Truth, rather than being the universal archly stated by Jane Austen, is contextual, only valid according to circumstances.