

# **"The Present Isn't What It Used To Be": A Phenomenological Encounter with Joseph Zinker**

Paul Barber (2001)

*Preamble: Joseph Zinker trained with Fritz Perls and worked alongside Abraham Maslow. Besides being a leading exponent of Gestalt, he is a bridge to its earliest roots. I was first awakened to Gestalt through Zinker's seminal work "Creative Process in Gestalt Therapy" (Zinker 1978), wherein I found an approach to Gestalt - which though clinically aware and gracefully therapeutic - was a celebration of life and an expression of being; an integration of the art as well as the science of psychotherapy. In this light, when casually asked if I would like to interview Joseph Zinker for the British Gestalt Journal - I leapt at the chance. I therefore unashamedly own my bias in this interview as one of enthusiasm, an intention to learn and enjoy, and to greedily squeeze as much from the experience as possible. In the event, I got much more than I bargained for.*

## **Pre-Contact**

The day prior to our meeting, Joseph and I have a brief telephone conversation where we arrange a time and place (10am the Grafton Hotel), and I agree to fax a guesstimate of the questions I might ask. As the interview is to address these questions fluidly, they are portrayed for reference below:

*"Dear Joseph,*

*Well here's an interesting exercise, taking my transference for a walk so as to make a stab at the synergy and questions we might co-create together. Imaginatively, it's a little like meeting the ghost before meeting the event!*

*Hopefully, the questions below are not exhaustive, and though somewhat clumsy in their present form, will metamorphose in the light of tomorrow's meeting. This said, they catch my bias and what I bring:*

*'I'd like to start by asking you to say something about how you came to Gestalt, and how this romance has informed your life and your 'being' in the world?'*

*'So what would you cite as the essence of Gestalt? Its very soul?'*

*'Though Perls seems to have been distanced somewhat by the Gestalt Community, I note with enjoyment a review you performed for the British Gestalt Journal (BGJ) in the early 1990's (Zinker 1993), of a book on Fritz Perls, where you broke with convention to imaginatively interview Perls himself. From this exercise, I was left with an impression of your deepest regard for Perls as a man and as an expression of things Gestalt.'*

*'At a recent meeting of the Friends of the Gestalt Journal we were adamant that there is more to Gestalt than psychotherapy (...). Though it is well documented how art informs your Gestalt, I wonder how Gestalt informs your art?'*

*'Interestingly, your work, more than any other, seems to have championed the 'Art and aesthetics of Gestalt' at a time when the 'Science of Gestalt', social acceptability and accreditation were tending to preoccupy the Gestalt community. In this context, I wonder if you would like to say more about Gestalt as an expression of love?'*

*'In an earlier interview in the BGJ with Robin Skynner (Heming 1995), a founding member of the Institute of Family Therapy and the Institute of Group Analysis, cited how much he appreciated the clarity of your approach and thinking around resistance, as portrayed 'In Search of Good Form' (Zinker 1994). Do you consciously strive to dialogue with other disciplines or is this rather by chance than design? (...)'.*

With the above I enclosed a brief resume` of myself.

The following morning is crisp and bright - the hotel dark and encasing. Arriving a few minutes early and getting no answer from Joseph's room, I wander in to the lounge. A slightly built sprightly gentleman with white hair and alert eyes, closely followed by an attractive equally alert woman catches my attention. This couple are Joseph and Sandra Zinker. "You have a good antenna" Joseph observes, placing his hand gently on my arm. They ask for five minutes to prepare their room for the interview.

## **Contact**

On arrival in their room I am warmly welcomed, tea poured, Joseph and I sit facing each other across a small occasional table, Sandra sits out of sight upon the bed. I turn on the tape recorder:

(Paul) "Right, we're in gear. First Joseph, do you have any questions you want to ask me - or any conditions you'd like to check out?"

(Joseph) "No, you're an interesting man with an interesting background, and you took the trouble to send me your vitae".

"One thing I missed out was that I was very drawn to Gestalt therapy through reading your work (...) in which I saw something about the expression of life, rather than containment, which I was practising as a psychodynamic group worker at the time. So I thank you for bringing me upon the road of Gestalt".

"Well, you're very welcome - and I did not even know it" (we share in laughter together).

"So I'm wondering about you, who Joseph Zinker is? And how he demonstrates and shares his Gestalt?"

"Well, how shall I start? Maybe I'll tell you a little about myself through some of the questions you asked, this romance, how it has informed my life.

I came to America as a seventeen year old... a rather damaged, depressed seventeen year old... so I got into psychoanalysis. I lived in New York... and went to NY University, and studied a bit of phenomenology and Russian literature, and took pre-medical courses, but mostly social sciences. In any case, I got into psychoanalysis - and I so wanted to tell you that - because New York in the 1950's was psychoanalysis - as there was nothing else.

Well, there was Willhelm Reich, but I wasn't really aware of it until much later. But the way I came to Gestalt therapy, was that I studied philosophy and existentialism.

Existentialism was very important for me because I was trying to make sense of all the killings; as I'm a Jew and a survivor, a surviving Jew, and I wanted to make sense of meaninglessness... what happened. So I read Camus and Sartre, and Binswanger and Cooper. (...)

And so one day I went to a lecture about Zen Buddhism and psychoanalysis, and the lecturer was a Dutch psychoanalyst whose name was Eilhard Van Domarus, and during the breaks I came over to Dr. Van Domarus, and you know when you're a kid you can just ask for an appointment as you don't

know any better (we laugh). So I asked for an appointment, and I got into therapy with Dr Domarus, as a youngster. I was also in therapy with another... and I'll tell you a story as to why Van Domarus didn't work out. In both experiences of psychoanalysis I lay on the couch... and I never looked at the guy. They were both men."

"Classic stuff"

"Classic stuff, and that leads me to tell you about Fritz Perls. I was very lucky, I had good teachers.

With Van Domarus I had a regular 4 o'clock appointment on Central Park West, you know in this little office. And one day, after some time in analysis I walked in, and before he put me on the couch I faced him, and said...`Dr Van Domarus... your sclera ... your sclera is yellow'. And... he was shocked. And he said...`Young man, I have seen patients all day long, from 8 o'clock in the morning, and you're the first person, who saw me. Because you've told me what you saw, I will tell you, my story, which is I am dying of liver cancer, and this will be our last session'... (silence).

So, after Van Domarus and this other man, I went to Cleveland and started looking for an existential analyst. Because this is 1959-1960 they didn't have such a thing in Ohio, as an existential analyst. And then I found Erv Polster, and he introduced me to Fritz Perls. And this leads me to really seeing, really seeing someone - like I'm looking at you. And the spectacular thing about Perls was he was not interested in content, he was interested only in what he saw and heard and, the process of seeing. And so it was for the first time that I felt seen, and that was my cup of tea, as I'm a painter, and I love to look and am interested in process.

So with Fritz I had this real encounter of being seen, and confronted and questioned. And he wasn't interested so much in my story as a story, so much as how I told the story, and how I spoke, and the sound of my voice and how I walked and so on. So that was my journey from DP (displaced persons) camps in Germany to New York, to NYU where I got my bachelors degree, to Ohio, to Cleveland, where I was working on my doctorate, and where I met Erv Polster, Fritz Perls, Laura Perls, Isadore Fromm, Carl Whitacker, Carl Rogers... Paul Goodman.

And then I did a dissertation on phenomenology of dying, in a single person, and its impact on their growth, because I was also a student of Maslow. So I did a Maslovian study and devised a way of measuring an hierarchy of needs, and I did just a simple process interview again and again for six

months, and rated the hierarchy of needs in this dying women; Maslow was so excited, so excited".

"Has this work been published?"

"It was published by the university college where I was teaching, in a limited publication in 1966, and it was called 'Rosa Lee: Motivation and the Crisis of Dying'. It was a little book, and believe I still have two copies of it. But, my teacher, Abraham Maslow, whom I met at the APA convention, was a professor at Brandice University, was just so very excited about it, he invited me to teach with him there. But I refused because I had already met Fritz, and he was really my major teacher.

I studied with Fritz on about a monthly basis, in a workshop situation for about 10 years, from 1960-1970. I think he died, March of Seventy.

So that's to sort of to get us started.

"I was struck by the journey you've made (...) and the waves of sadness I felt coming around (...) I was also impacted by your gentleness around something which is chaotic and traumatising".

"Yes, thank you. I think its true about me... I'm a sad and gentle man - I'm a gentle and sad man. And... I can get plenty excited!" (hoots of laughter).

When I was talking about this interview with Sandra yesterday, I had a little more energy. Now, as I'm sitting with you, I'm a little more shy. But I can get excited in my work, with my groups, pretty energised... but the sadness is always there. I'm always post traumatica. I don't have as many nightmares as I used to, but...I know I'm still post traumatic.

"Some wounds never heal - they're a part of life - they inform our character and being".

"Yes... I live a full life."

"I doubt it not" (we share in gentle laughter).

"Yes, an exciting life" (...).

"Could you say more about Fritz Perls and his impact on you?" (...).

"Yes, I'd be glad to tell you.

You know, I think what's struck me about Fritz, was that he really paid attention to what he saw. So if he were sitting here with you... he would be interested in how you hold your head, and the fore-shortened quality of your neck. And, how come you don't stick out your neck more? (...) He would go straight to the most fundamental structure of your body, how you sit, the sound of your voice. His interventions were very powerful. Very, very powerful. People were scared of him.

I was telling Sandra yesterday, I was never scared of Fritz Perls, I thought he was...an exciting Zen master. You know, he confronted me, as you just did about how collapsed I was. How collapsed my voice was, my chest. He had some work with Reich himself for a little bit of time. And he borrowed from everybody, unashamedly - in terms of ideas. So, I guess Fritz - by the time that I met him - was about my age as I am now. He was a chain smoker; he was very intense. (turning to Sandra) What else did I tell you yesterday?"

*Sandra "How he liked the contact with another person. The experience of the moment. How very present he was."*

"Oh yes, thank you" (we break into wide smiles as Sandra nests back on the bed)".

"I like this bouncing of energy".

"Yes, Sandra has a fine mind. Thank you Sandra. Because (turning back to me) - in some question of yours - about some people being critical of Fritz, what hasn't survived - is his presence. He was like a Zen master who taught you by... smearing himself all over you, in the most powerful way. He made you sit up. And his writing, there is no way he can communicate his presence in his writing to you. That is why people are so struck by films, awful black-and-white films, but they get a feeling for his presence.

But people like Jim Simkin and others upon the West Coast, mistook the power of his presence. They tried to imitate Fritz's presence, and what it came across as - was meanness. A kind of pushing, a mean confrontational quality. But Fritz was not mean, he was just a very fine acutely tuned clinician, and it was his presence. And people tried to imitate his presence.

If you want to learn from a great master about presence, the only way I can do that, is to show you how I am present with you - for you. I can only show you my presence, but it's not Fritz. I'm not interested in his presence; it doesn't serve me any more.

So, I think that that was a major misunderstanding of Fritz Perls, that people imitated his presence, as a kind of pseudo cruelty, or meanness or confrontation. Actually, he was a very fine, interesting man".

"Was he loving? For this part seems missing in all the accounts of Perls".

"No. Well, aaah, he was loving..."

We had a study group, there was a number of us in this study group. Erv Polster, Miriam Polster, Sonia Nevis, Ed Nevis, Cynthia Harris, Isabel Fredrericson, and... I experienced his lovingness, maybe twice, in ten years.

Once, Erv got confrontational with him, and demanded an explanation for something, and Fritz was very loving; very loving. When he talked to Erv it was like he was holding a baby in his arms. He was just sweet with Erv, he loved Erv. Then somebody's mother died, I think it was Miriam's mother, and I also saw his sweetness, in his voice in how he talked, and how he sort of lowered his energy level to accommodate the sadness and pain in the other.

With me, he was mostly irritated! Because I was a boy, you know, I was in my twenties, and he couldn't stand me. I think also he also couldn't stand the way how I had survived Germany and Russia and Poland, which was to make myself very small, and very servile, and sweet. He could not stand that. I think, as I kept growing during those years - he really wanted me to grow up and become a man.

You know, at one point he teased me, and I almost killed the man. I mean I literally started choking him... in the group. This was before I started travelling in Europe to teach Gestalt therapy, 1969. And he kept teasing me, and I warned him not to tease me any more, and it didn't occur to me - you know when you are inside the process - it didn't occur to me the teasing was a way of grabbing my neck. He teased my voice, he would say: 'How do you explain this top-dog under-dog with this way you are talking to us?' And he would say 'Do doh da daa da daa' (imitating whiny baby sounds - we burst into laughter). 'Don't do that Fritz, don't do that. I'm going to get mad with you' And he'd respond (in an even whinier voice) 'Don't do that Fritz I'm going to get mad with you'. And he was just... smoking... and long ash. So I warned him a couple of times, and then it came over me - and I grabbed him by the neck and started choking him and shaking him. And he was sitting like I was giving him a massage... smiling like an old fool...you know, like Dostoyesky's idiot! (laughter) Like I was giving him a neck massage! And the cigarette fell out of his mouth, and I was yelling and choking until I think it was Ed Nevis who said, 'You're going to kill him,

he's got a heart condition. Stop it!' And finally I stopped it. He looked at me, and said... `I think you're going to be OK' (laughter).

"You came alive - you were there for you"

"Yes. In some ways I think that teasing was the most loving thing he could do for me. And the next time I heard about him I was here, in London, reading the International Herald Tribune. And there was this obituary, in March 70. Fritz's obituary which was an awful obituary\* (see the footnote at the end of this paper), he had died while I was teaching Gestalt Therapy in London, and Leeds University with the organisational department there.

The other thing I want to say, is, what made me into more of a man than a frightened traumatised boy, was that he would shake me up on weekends, and then on Tuesday or Wednesday I had an appointment with Erv Polster... and Erv just soothed me and loved me and supported me and played with me. So I got to shuttle between Fritz's kind of sternness - he was not able to show his feeling.- and Erv's absolutely loving unconditional mothering". (...)

"When I read Perls, I feel a part of him as quite tender. I was struck by how irritated he was about your gentleness, and guess that you showed him a part of himself he was at pains to hide in his everyday function?"

"I think that's true... his father was a travelling wine salesman, and real sadistic with his mother. So what he witnessed was his father's sadism with his mother, where his father would say `You're just a piece of shit'. This kind of behaviour. And I don't think he ever got over it you know. It's like identification with the aggressor, I mean I don't know what it was, but Fritz was mostly loved by us. We learned a lot from him."

"I think history has forgotten about Fritz's compassion, and shown us his public - teaching - persona, and it's missed the man. I'd really encourage you, if there is ever time and enjoyment in it for you, to write more about you and Perls, and those days that give a sense of something more than history."

"Yes. Well, you have my permission to write about some of the things I'm saying (we chuckle together). Ah, but I'm glad you're aware of that aspect of Fritz; he was a powerful teacher (long pause). I think I was a good student." (...)

*Sandra: "Sometimes you say how Fritz was very good at staying in the moment. Staying and seeing a person".*

"Thank you for reminding me.

We just came from another country - we will not name - as I want to tell you about the work we did with this man in the group. And Sandra witnessed the work, and it was one of those situations where you tended to ask lots of questions about the background, and I just followed and stayed in the moment, and insisted that he stayed with me. He was doing couples work - and with his partner - and in the beginning he had a lovely benign face, and ... as I stayed with him in the moment, I asked him to tell her - it was kind of the beginning of the relationship - what he projected on her, what he saw and how he saw her, and... suddenly this benign face... turned into steel. And you could see the purple veins in his neck, and this sadistic rage emerge. And I think what I learned from Fritz, is to just sit and watch this change with great respect and interest - the way a painter would watch it. I resisted the temptation of asking him who he was talking to - for surely he was not talking to this women, and that would have been an analytic kind of a thing, but I stayed with him - both of them - for an hour and a half. And it was a spectacular experience. And so... what interested me was how did his ongoing perception, and how his colouring of the situation informed him about his relationship to women?

So, that's what I love to do... I love to stay in the moment and... have the moment inform me and the client - or groups of clients - about what's going on for them."

"I'm struck by the art of living and the art inside this process, and I'm wondering how Gestalt has also informed you - as an artist?"

"Yes, well... I was an artist before I was a therapist. I survived in camps in Germany... by making doodles and drawings with whatever I could find. So because I was forced to be quiet and not cry, I could use my eyes. And I think I became as a therapist more and more visual, so a lot of the data comes to me from what I see. For me, it's the same thing, therapy and art. Gestalt therapy and life.

You know, people, Sandra reminded me, that when some people say `When I do Gestalt'... I get so furious, because they have an I-It relationship to Gestalt therapy or to Gestalt theory. Its like... there is me, there is Gestalt, and I'll do Gestalt with you.

I am Gestalt. I am the Process. I am the man who is looking. I am the man with passion. I am the man whose heart... is injured. I am the man that grieves. I am the man who asks for forgiveness (long pause). It's all the things that I am!

Gestalt is intermingled, so I don't do it, I don't see it as an it relationship; my life is enriched... by what I learn, deeply enriched".

"This is interesting, because I think we are now moving from an I-Thou relationship to more of a Thou-Thou one, a sort of transpersonal meeting."

"That's right.. and I noticed in your background you're interested in the transpersonal. You know, it's very nice for me to hear that, for as I'm talking to you and as you're asking me certain things, I feel more engaged, engaged with you. And that we could go places with that... you could influence me deeply, and together we could have a nice trip (long pause). (...)

"So the essence of life is when you start to contact things above and beyond the self, (...) `the still becoming' where life itself beats... not inside the ego - that small fractured world" (a very long pause).

"It's in the space between us, that the ascending experience can take place, it's not in you it's not in me, it's how we make the energy travel from that space... into another realm; what Gestalt therapists call - contact. (...) But contact doesn't describe it. And if you think about Thou-Thou, it's really an ascendant experience.

Was it Buber or somebody else who said: `If your voice doesn't carry the tune, and you come to me and ask me to sing with you, together our voices will reach the melody'. The cantorial level that neither one of us alone can contact and connect.

Of course I'm a Jew, I'm a son and a grandson of a line of Kohineen, which means priests; a kind of blood-line of priests; so its familiar to me - this business of when we work with each other we are also singing to God... We are singing the praises of something beautiful. Above and beyond" (long pause).

"I feel a need to check my recording... to sort of come back to a sense of grounding again (we laugh some more at my clumsy attempt to bring us back to conventional reality). I want to make sure this is working" (now fiddling with the tape recorder).

"Be a shame if it wasn't" (laughter)

"Its working... and, I feel safe again."

(We break for tea and the tape is kept running. Joseph offers me chocolate, Sandra offers to fetch real milk in place of the dried variety, and says how much she is enjoying this meeting. She shares that Joseph and herself have been together for three years, and that many people

want to know about Joseph, but, unlike today, "they don't usually ask the exciting questions" or "get to know his heart and soul". She is as quick and bright as Joseph is wise and mellow and I bask in the warmth of their relationship, of which today, I am invited in to share.

Fritz again enters our conversation. I suggest that history tends to lose the spark and to just give us the form, and note the pristine forces at work in Gestalt to make it respectable. Joseph notes how Perls has been reduced and plundered, that:

**"Many of Fritz's ideas have been suggested not be his ideas, to be Goodman's ideas, and that he didn't understand field theory, and systems theory, and the piling on of bull-shit over bull-shit over bull-shit, and not realising that Fritz was a Zen Master, nothing less than a Zen master. And no amount of rationalising and making Gestalt more scientific will add to it. We have to build, but we do not have to make Fritz smaller in the building, or bury him in the basement and say he was an old shit. And we've been doing this to Freud as well".**

I suggest that we in the UK have indeed buried Fritz and venerated Laura, as she's more respectable. Joseph observes that Laura came from an aristocratic family:

(Joseph) **"Her father was not a wine salesman" (much laughter) So she played the piano and took dance. I knew her very well".**

(Paul) "I get the image of cast-iron knickers and frostiness".

Joseph **"Yaaa, well, Laura loved me. Laura would come into town... and would call me and say: `Well, are you taking me to dinner?' So Laura was passionate, and that's another thing you might not get from reading; Laura would grab me and hug me, and was really beautiful. You know, there was hardness in her chest, that's because she was 70 years old, and there was a rigidifying of her body".**

Joseph and I dutifully slide back to the formality of facing each other across the small glass table, Sandra goes back to her position upon the bed as if to watch `the rest of the show').

"I don't know where to next?" (...)

**"There's one thing in your notes, that is sort of, `Where is Gestalt therapy going?' And I wanted to tell you, briefly, about my thinking about that.**

We are more interested you know - when I think about thirty years ago or more - in larger systems. Fritz worked with individuals; Fritz, truly, did not understand anything about couples.

Fritz was not able to carry on a good relationship with Laura. She lived in New York, and eventually, he lived on the West Coast and British Columbia and so on, but, never mind, as a theoretician, as a therapist - Fritz was very keen with individuals. Yaaa, he had no knowledge of group process. (...) He worked from the centre of the field of the group, and he worked with individuals, and the group was basically a place of people observing... and honouring his work. But he really didn't understand or particularly care about using or seeing the group as a living organism, and... those of us who followed developed group process, not only as something that you follow and pay attention to and explore in its own right, but later, using dream-work as theatre, in a group setting. So someone had a dream, and the whole group - and actually I developed that - became a bunch of actors playing out the archetypal dream that an individual... reported. And now I think there are some very gifted people, like yourself, working in organisations doing consulting. That's all new.

Working in government, one of our students, Caroline Lukensmeyer, was a consultant to the White House - in this last presidency. She was our student, a junior - and she came onto the faculty - and so on. And Ed Nevis has written a number of books on organisational development, and... how organisations learn. So here you have movement from individual learning... to how cultures learn. And I've done work here. Just yesterday, upon the news it said, British Petroleum and Shell earned hundreds billions of dollars more than last year - this year was a good year for them.

So a year ago it was a bad year so they fired 30,000 workers in the field. But, to make the story short, I worked with managers at Shell, and I sat with them for two hours, and I just sat, and took notes, and told them how beautiful they were. And, they almost shit in their pants... because they expected some kind of intellectual bull-shit. And I told them, you Frank, you asked George about his son, who is sick, that's beautiful, that's competent, and you did this with him, and you did this with her, and what I see here, in this professional meeting - in Houston on the fiftieth floor - is a lot of caring; that you care about each other. And when I got through one of them said: `Well that's, that's straight from our vision statement!' So I didn't read your vision statement and I'm telling you what I see here in this group!

*Sandra: "It was like two days not two hours".*

"Oh, but what I meant was after two hours of just shutting my mouth and really paying attention to their process, I was able to give them the phenomenological data, other than interpreting their behaviour... or making it more strategic about how that behaviour could get them more millions of dollars. So, I think we've grown, in terms of applications to groups and the larger world." (...)

"The group here seems to act as a metaphor for the race, the world, something larger than man. What I find a very exciting is how Gestalt seems to accommodate both the sense we are personally responsible, and that we are also responsible to and for the greater whole."

"Exactly, and we are responsible to each other."

Sandra and I do a lot of couples work, all over the world, South America, Finland, Israel, and one of the things we're picking up from married couples is that, they make the assumption that if you are ever committed into a relationship, you throw out the rules of being responsible to each other and you give yourself the freedom... to be an arse-hole - if you'll pardon my language. To mistreat the other. As one woman said: 'I married him, so now I can be myself'. 'So regression to 1960?' 'You mean now that I married him, I have to worry about what he needs and what he wants?'

So there is this... vast misunderstanding, that's really paradoxical, that somehow if you and I become business partners, I can be fooling myself? But I can't be fooling myself, I have to pay attention - to you having or wanting a break, maybe wanting a cup of tea, maybe asking me a question - to what your needs are."

"If I want to see my shadow, I just pay attention to how I'm responding and relating to my partner. (...) If I divorce my shadow from myself, I'm divorcing a lot of potential; love as well as anger as well as grief. So for me it's something about staying in dialogue with every part, and learning to love the part I've exiled from myself, in order to integrate it back."

"That's beautiful. You're saying another level now, you're saying that only after I'm in touch with my own shadow - can I fully appreciate... the other?. Right, and I think it goes the other way around. Only if I can appreciate her, can I be in touch with my own shadow. My Anima, with my sadism - or whatever. So it goes like this or it goes like this (flowing with his hands back and forth between us). There's a kind of part that goes back and forth, but without you (now turning to Sandra), what's my life? Shit! My life is shit! To be alone in a London hotel room, without that kind of engagement, what is it worth? So, we need each other; (now softly) we need each other. And knowing ourselves... helps... to love the other."

"A sense of losing oneself inside the other, so as to catch parts of yourself you don't exercise so regularly?" (We share soft and gentle laughter).

**"I like that, I like the whole notion of surrender... and especially teaching men to surrender to their women. How hard that is."**

"I just got a twinge, from here (patting just below my navel) up to my heart; it's like I guarded myself from that one. Thank you" (explosive laughter... pause).

**"Well, you're a young man, you know - I mean - I think the reason I say that is... it's developmental. My prediction about you is that as you grow older, you will get even more sweet, and more relaxed in your shoulders and neck, and belly, and surrender will be effortless after a while. It will be a relief for you, to surrender to your partner, but... I think it's difficult when we are young, because so much of our energy is... to liberate ourselves from the prison of our parents, and our restrictive culture. (...)"**

"We come from the field and must melt back to the field".

**"That's exactly right. It's a wonderful paradox, you collect these degrees and you write these papers and you go through this part of your life when you think `This is it', those are the things I must have, I must prove.**

**You know, that all the... boxes and boxes of papers in the basement, some of it will be published, but we accumulate... only to realise that we must throw it out (laughs). Not that it's garbage, but it's finished, and we must move on. You know, to... a deeper humility, a deeper connection with others."**

"My sense is that it is very important for us to construct our ego in the first half of our life, but that it's even more important to give it back in the second part".

**"Exactly (laughing), that's very wise".**

"This sense that, we must have something before we can give it up; there's a kind of grace in striving to get something, then being able to give it up."

**"That's exactly right.**

**I think to go back to Fritz, and those early days, some of his students were twenty years old. And some of them were not even in school, they were not even graduate students. So, he asked them to stay in the moment, but they didn't have the ground, they didn't have the ground of richness against which they could experience themselves. So the moment**

was naked, de-nuded; it was like a tree without leaves, it had no richness in it; there was no referent, you know, all they learnt was some cockamamie idea of staying in the moment... without a ground. For you, you're mature enough, that when I ask you to stay in the moment, your ground will inform the moment, will enrich you... and you can shuffle back and forth. You can't teach a child to be a therapist" (gentle background laughter).

"Conversely, often children have something about presence that also adds to therapy. It's about keeping the inner child within you, around you, as well as the wise old man".

**"Yes, we have many examples of that, in Brazil, nieces and nephews that are just awesome five years old. Do you have children?"**

"My son died... some five years ago. Yet he feels very present in many ways."

**"What happened?"**

"He developed cancer at the age of twenty-three, and was dead within six months. We spent a marvellous final year. It was a growthful year for both of us, the last adventure we shared together."

**(Softly) "Sorry to hear that... Was he your only child?"**

"Yes" (long silence).

**"I'll sit with you for a minute... let you feel that. That's a wonderful gift you gave me, to share that... I get so full of myself I forgot about you (we share in soft laughter... followed by silence).**

**I have two daughters, one of them developed cancer... of the breast, and lost her breast... so I just have an inkling of the... pain."**

"And also the joy. In the final weeks and days Marc became my teacher. He somehow lost his physicality, but gained something other, and the dialogue took off at one more level. (...) As my richest experience of myself, my lessons, came from Marc, so my resonance with your earlier phenomenological dialogue with the dying."

**"He was very lucky to have a father like you... who allowed him to be a good teacher".**

"We never got snared with politics... such as who was the parent" (laughter).

"That's great... So, I stopped you from looking at your notes. Would you like to look at your notes?"

"My sense is we've covered a fair amount of this territory, and in different ways than expected... but life is what you get when you've planned for everything else."

*Sandra: (turning to me) "I think you asked about resistance".*

(Joseph turns and walks over to Sandra) "I love your brain, Sandra, (hugs her head while she laughs with embarrassment - though she is obviously loving it also).

*Sandra "You can cover this territory now (more laughter). Now you don't come to bed now - you stay out... now there was something you were talking about, yesterday, when you were going through the questions, you were talking about the dinner, about life and art."*

"Oh yes, I think he would love to hear that story. How art and gestalt are related to life. Should I say that first before resistance?"

*Sandra "You'd better ask him".*

"No, I'm asking you (warmly mischievous laughter... now waving my notes). You can put this in the garbage - he can pick and choose."

*Sandra "Yes - but I think it's an important story".*

"About the quality of Gestalt therapy and the quality of life.

I was invited by Joe Wysong, editor of the Gestalt Journal, to talk to this convention at Montreal last summer, in honour of Erv and Miriam. And in preparation I tried to read everything that they had written, and Sandra was helping me and we were going through some junk, cartons and cartons of stuff, and she found a tape, an audio tape, and it said: 'Giving Erving a hair-cut' (laughter). It was great!

So, at this convention I was discouraged to play it, as I was told that the quality of the sound was bad - but I had something else in mind - I was trying to make a point. So on this tape, imagine this, I am with Erv and Miriam, and... you hear in the background, Victoria Villasanchus singing Villa Lobus (more laughter bubbles up), and... we are laughing and drinking and Miriam was cooking, and I'm cutting Erv's hair, because I was the only one he could trust - who wouldn't screw up his hair - because he was losing his hair and there wasn't much of it. Most of it was in the back, and he had a

tendency to grow it too long in the back - to compensate for the loss in the front. And... so I was cutting his hair on this tape, and then I'd shut off the tape and I said to the audience: `Erv Polster and Miriam Polster... it's not just about Gestalt therapy, it's about living your life, it's about the quality of a beautiful life, it's about opera, it's about singing, it's about celebrating, it's about dancing, travelling.

You know, Miriam sang, incredible opera, an incredible voice - you know? And I said, that's what came about - life!

Gestalt therapy urges you to keep your eyes open and to use yourself and to relate to the world, in all of its splendour and ugliness. To really be in the world. It's not sitting in a darkened room and doing `What do you feel now? What do you feel now?' What do you feel now?' Doing an experiment, that's not Gestalt therapy, that's something you learn when you're a graduate student, but then you have to wake up and live it! (hearty laughter) And suffer it and suffer it. And so that's the story... (more laughter) about Gestalt therapy and life."

"That takes me beyond the question again, about Gestalt being more than psychotherapy."

"I was glad to tell you that story. I'll tell you what Sandra said to me, because she didn't know me all of her life - she's been watching me work. And she said to me yesterday, while we were going over the material... you're not a therapist, when you do this kind of work... you're a philosopher, you're a theologian... you're a philosopher who sits with people. You teach people about their awareness of you - and the world. This is not therapy, these other people who invite you are therapists, and... I never thought about it in that way."

*Sandra "This quality of just being human, human nature and human suffering, human joy. This is what I see. Not just psychological understanding of what's going on, it's more than that, what's going on in the human, as part of the human nature, it's bigger."*

"I think my own healing - and helping others - took off when I stopped trying to pour myself into the role of being a psychotherapist, and became a person who was curious, who stayed curious and wanted to learn; someone who treated his sessions as qualitative holistic research; who had an interest in the person and a compassion for the human condition. This informed my Gestalt, I feel, much more than any amount of techniques and theory."

"I'm so glad to, meet you. Truly, you're a jewel, you're exceptional. Do you know that you're exceptional in that way? (...). I really appreciate you

being here. Just from the notes, I knew there's a kindred spirit coming to visit with me. Just by what you picked up from my writing, and the questions you raised... I like it very much. I like you very much; how you think".

"I don't think things happen by accident, so my sense is we were destined to meet this way. (...) I first read your book to extract the knowledge - the worst way of reading a book" (we laugh).

"So, do you want to know about resistance? (...) Well, you know, it's a journey - resistance.

Psychoanalytic theory... often misunderstood resistance, to mean the patient resisted the therapist, or resisted awareness or resisted the therapist's ideas... and rejected them. So the first revolutionary step was by Fritz, who said, resistance is mastication, it's chewing. A patient - a client - is trying to understand what the hell you're saying. Therefore, he asks questions.

Now this is where Fritz failed, because he decided people shouldn't ask questions - because that's a form of resistance. And you know, Laura joined him, by calling it the dummy complex. So, he assumed, that because people asked questions about something, that they were playing dumb, and that that was a form of resistance. But my view... is the opposite view, that if you ask me questions about something, and I join you, in your question, and support you in your question, you will learn something about yourself. So instead of pushing against your questioning, or belittling it, I support it and therefore I support your learning process, your metabolising what's going on between us. I support your chewing. And... that's what makes me a good teacher for you, is that I congratulate you on your capacity to chew. This method is the method of... joining the person in their resistance, supporting resistance, OK? Which in turn connects with the paradoxical theory of learning, that the more I tell you what I see, the more I join you - in who you really are - the more you will change. That's it, the so-called paradox. So the more I join your resistance, the more you will become... Paul. (long pause) And I think we are - people are - still confused about that, about this resistance business.

For example, with couples, when Sandra and I said to a couple - first intervention after listening for a while - we said to them, now we will tell you, all the ways in which we see how beautiful you are. Now notice this: 'What time is it already, I've already spent money on this and you're going to tell me some complement! You know, tell me something that's wrong, that's your speciality, isn't it? To tell me how fucked up I am? How fucked up we are?' 'But no - not yet, first, you must hear how beautiful you

are... because you don't even see it. You don't even know how competent you are, so we want to be the first to witness it, and to tell you, and to give you phenomenological data, how we saw it, and it's not a cheap complement - how we saw your competence - the way you talk with us'. So you like go - join the resistance - you join it even before it emerges (laughs)... from the field, from which people can then face the darkness, which is fifteen minutes later maybe. Face the darkness, the under-belly, the pain, the dysfunction. So we just turn everything upside down. It's very exciting stuff."

"I like this coming from an appreciation of life. (...) I get a sense of how you've integrated a whole range of disciplines besides Gestalt within you. The analytic flavour comes in, the person-centredness of Rogers, the Maslovian sense of the higher self, plus the learning theorist comes through you. How you are your own Gestalt."

"Becoming more and more my own Gestalt (bursts into laughter), as we sit (more shared laughter), as we talk" (our laughter crescendos).

*Sandra: "Remember, you studied the New Testament".*

"I was telling her, that... when I was studying existentialism, and reading the Bible, how I gave myself an exercise that had to do with... Moses, meeting God and meeting the burning bush. And Moses said to God: 'Who are you anyway?' And God said: 'I am what I am'... and I loved it. And so - I think this was even before Gestalt - I started saying to myself, I am what I am. I am this man, sitting here, on my skinny arse, looking at this man across from me, I have a little ache in my back, that's what I am, that's what I am - I'm Joseph! And I've got this female force on my right side (turning to Sandra), and that's what I am. And we have this round table here, with this... English stuff around us (laughs), the fabrics and the flowers, and that's what I am. And so, I dance, I was at university, I was a freshman, that whole notion, and of course I'm becoming I am what I am... your presence transforms me - and I'm no longer what I am. Because, unlike the burning bush which stays the same... we keep changing" (we each share in silence).

*Sandra: "What an interesting story, (turning to me) and I think he's talking about... how he, Joseph, combines this eclecticism, and (turns to Joseph) how you took something from your past, your Christian experience... you said how you took the course with the priest."*

"Ah that's right, in Queen's College New York... I found this guy who was teaching phenomenology, he was Christian, he was a priest (...) - and I really love to synthesise - I really love to put things together. And, all this

is going on at Greenwich Village, and NYU later on, as I go to my painting classes at Brooklyn Museum, and do lots of painting and get my stuff into shows. So, I think that once I realised I was alive, and I came to America, and I was all beaten up, and they wouldn't even take me in to the Army because they thought I was a junkie, because I was so thin, straight out of Germany, they looked for puncture marks... thinking I was a junkie. So once they wouldn't take me because I begged them to let me stay in America instead of going to Korea, that I was a pre-medical student who just wanted to study, they let me go. But, once I woke up and realised - I'm alive, I just grabbed everything I could... I just had this enormous hunger, enormous hunger."

"What was the point of your awakening?"

"It's... it's a great question... I think it had something to do with... my name. I think that as I was growing up, my parents called my brother by his name - Ted, but they called me - 'our little one': 'Come over here little one'. I was the younger brother. And then in Greenwich Village I found a girl friend, and we started living together, and for the first time - I heard her say - 'Joseph'... it was like I suddenly woke up. Then I had a name. And I think it had symbolic value, because, I invited her to an art show of NYU faculty and staff, where my painting was hanging of Poland burning, of Lutck - where I was born - burning as we were passing by. And I think the mixture of being seen and recognised and appreciated, combined with hearing my own name... caused me to wake up.

So, that's sort of... it's a tricky thing, to answer a question like that - you know, because I think I'm still waking up (we chuckle together), I'm still waking up. You know if you weren't here I wouldn't be as awake... as I am, because you're here I'm waking up, and then she says something and I begin waking up some more... because I'm seen, so you make the Josephian world evident."

"I don't know where this question is coming from, but I have an intuition to ask about your first memory?" (...)

"Well, I don't know if we can publish this, but my first memory is that I'm an infant, and I'm constipated, and... my father who is a dentist (bursts into a guffaw of laughter), is using one of his dental tools to dig out - this little turd out of me (gales of shared laughter). But, I think, the thing that is precious to me, about that, is my father... who was a delicious, gentle man, and more of a mother to me than my own mother. But I must have been five months old... something like that."

*Sandra "Remember the thing with the Paisley fabric?"*

"Ohh Yes, Oh well that's a richer memory... at that point I'm eight years old, and we are in a basement of a cathedral - and World War Two - and the bombs, and we are so deep in the basement - about five stories under the ground - and we just hear the sounds of the bombs. My father, brother, are on the medical team, up there in the world burying bodies. They were in the burial group... collecting bodies from the streets, and we're with all these women and children in the basement. And there are people going crazy, there's a women... screaming and yelling, going into a psychosis, and I'm a little boy, and I'm trying to get some support from my mother, and I say to her: `Mother, I'm afraid!' And she says to me: `Go to sleep, everybody's afraid - its wartime'. It's the only thing she can give me... And there's a moment, where, I put my head on her dress - on her lap - and I look down, and I see this beautiful paisley fabric. All these wonderful patterns of red and green, and you know - I go into the fabric, I go with my eyes into the fabric... and... I love it. The fabric, the colour - gives me... the world! And informs me that I will be a painter, that I love art, that the world has beauty in it. And I - eventually - fall asleep. But, I think for me it's important, the whole visual world, and how I - some-how - found the comfort of surviving, in that terrible - absolutely terrible -situation (we sit with silence). Life is so rich... Am I giving you enough material?"

"Oh yes (we break into spontaneous laughter)... oh yes".

"Feel free to... play with it, and to do whatever you please". (...).

## Post-Contact

Though the interview effectively ended at the above point, before I left, Joseph and Sandra interviewed me, and enquired about my relationship with my partner - Anna. They epitomise life-long learners. After my sharing an incident from childhood, Joseph says to me:

"Well now, I'm glad to report to you, that you're really sticking out your neck more. Your head is coming out of your torso more."

Nothing goes un-noticed in this hotel room today! We spend some fifteen minutes sharing intimacies relating to the joys of being a couple. They have been generous hosts, and I hope I have not intruded unduly within their relationship and upon their time. Finally, after co-creating a two-

hour Gestalt adventure - from what was expected to be a sixty minute interview - we hug and move towards our respective destinies.

Sitting before my recorder - writing up this interview - I still reverberate from our meeting. Being truly met, I have changed, and am aware of a new reference point within me.

Prior to publication I e-mailed this article to Joseph for comment, and was pleasantly surprised by his feedback:

"I am very pleased. Pleased that we both took time to prepare ourselves and that we didn't rush through the process. Reading through the 18 pages, I felt that we opened our hearts and spirits to each other and that I opened myself to you fully. (...)

I was touched by how you included our break, and how you incorporated Sandra's comments into the fabric of the text. I felt seen by you."

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\* **Footnote:** "Dr Frederick Perls died yesterday in Chicago at the age of 76. Perls was the creator of a psychotherapeutic method called Gestalt therapy. He performed his workshops in Esalen Institute and was known for wearing colourful jumper suits" (reported in Zinker 1993).

#### **An Acknowledgement:**

*The above paper represents the full working manuscript from which an article of the same title was extracted for the British Gestalt Journal*

*(BGJ). I am indebted to Malcolm Parlett, editor of the BGJ, who commissioned me to interview Joseph Zinker, and who kindly gave his permission for me to reproduce this paper for a selected audience.*

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