

REDESIGNING THE PAST

This story involves a gutsy therapist who, many years ago, pushed me to revisit old pain. The work was heavily emotional. The points of change were hard but brilliant moments etched into the underlying materials of my old experiences they now replace. He used my own ability to fantasize, and whatever he gleaned from his therapist, Fritz Perls. I wanted to add to my own repertoire of helping behaviors the kinds of things he did to help me. This is a story of my journey.

By Gale Goldberg Wood

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E.E. Cummings, my favorite poet, says in one of his short pieces, "twice I have lived forever in a smile." I did not really understand what he meant until I lived forever in the smiles of Lisa, Sandra, Bonnie, Walter, Arthur, and Claire, six people with whom I worked in a small, private practice I maintain in addition to my primary job as professor of social work.

The preface to my story involves a gutsy therapist who, many years ago, pushed me to revisit old pain, which resulted in filling in some of the gaps in my childhood experiences as well as changing some of the painful ones. The work was heavily emotional. The points of change were hard but brilliant moments etched into the underlying materials of my old experiences they now replace. He used my own ability to fantasize, and whatever he gleaned from his therapist, Fritz Perls. And he helped me change parts of my life forever. I wanted to add to my own repertoire of helping behavior the kinds of things he did to help me. This is a story of my journey.

The first thing I did was review the gestalt therapy literature (an academic's occupational hazard), looking for how to do it. My search was fascinating and intellectually rewarding, but not instructive. That is when I realized and attached the adjective gutsy,

in both senses of the word, to the man who did that therapy with me. He worked from his gut, and he took risks. Realizing that, I was initially afraid to try it with clients. Although I have been doing therapy for many years, as well as teaching direct practice to graduate students in social work, the idea of using Gestalt techniques made me feel like a novice, scared and unknowing. Gestalt therapy is not like ordinary therapy in which things develop over time. It is fast and powerful. It generates and requires almost total immersion of both practitioner and client in a sea of raw emotion. It would have been less frightening to contemplate doing if I could take a client's hand and, together, we could wade gradually into that sea. But I remember from my personal experience that it demands a dive, head first, then quick responses to whatever the water churns up. I was not at all sure that I had the guts to do it. I was not sure if I could protect my client and me from the undertow.

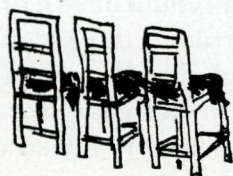
I thought about the safety of my clients. The dictum first do no harm ran back and forth across my mind. I told myself that if I get in trouble I can always shift back to the familiar comfort of ordinary therapy, but I suspect that I was whistling in the dark. I wondered if I could initially risk me, immerse me, without risking a client. I needed



an interim step to try out my capacity to risk myself. I thought of Ramona. Yes, I have an appointment with Ramona today.

I sit with Ramona, who is paranoid. She knows it and I know it. We have said the word to each other many times. Today, I am going to try seeing and feeling her world through her eyes in a way that I have never done before. Beyond empathy. If I can, I am going to get inside of her and look out through her eyes. I feel my own resistance. Partly, I do not want to see what she sees. I am afraid of it. And what if I cannot get back to being me? There's the rub. I am scared, but I force myself to try. I imagine that I am she. Nothing happens. I envision standing behind her, then stepping into her. Still nothing. Then I see it! The mine field. She/I am walking through a vast mine field. Every step is treacherous. I am terrified!

I say it. I say, My, God! You're walking through a mine field. No wonder you're so frightened! Ramona connects with it instantly. She cries. She did not think I really understood before. And up to that moment, she was right. I had not. I say, no wonder you restrict your sphere of movement! No wonder you stay at home, alone, so much! She nods while tears continue to roll slowly down her cheeks. Ramona feels that she has finally been understood. But it is I who have had a major breakthrough. I can do this.



I can swim a stroke or two in the sea of emotion without flailing around and reaching for a life preserver. I am a bit less afraid now. Still respectful, but less afraid. I trust my gut more as well as my capacity to work fast now that I have been able to understand Ramona's experience so quickly when I stepped into her. I am much closer to trying out some Gestalt therapy techniques to help clients redesign painful aspects of their past.

I am surprised that I have no trouble getting myself back out of Ramona. But something else happens that I did not anticipate. Her mine field stays with me. Part of my world is now a mine field. I wonder what I will come out with the next time I step into a client and look out through her or his eyes.

FIRST ENCOUNTER OF THE GESTALT KIND

I sit with Lisa. She says that she is edgy and she seems constantly on the verge of tears. She thinks she thinks she may be depressed. She says that her elderly, next-door neighbor, a woman whom she has grown extremely fond of since she moved in three years ago, is dying from cancer. As she tells me this, she breaks into sobs that last for several minutes. I am very moved by her affection for her neighbor both love and pain bring tears to my eyes. I try to envision standing behind her and stepping in, as I did with Ramona. And again, I resist. I wonder what I am afraid of. Surely what I see and feel will not be as threatening to me as looking through the paranoid eyes of

Ramona. Am I risking something I am not yet aware of? Am I afraid I will lose my self? My sense of self? Again, I force myself to do it. My self. My self.

I step in, and the first thing I sense in the depth and power of Lisa's affection for her neighbor is family love. That, coupled with what seems to me the all-consuming nature of her response, seems out of proportion, and I start wondering if Lisa might be grieving for more than one person. I do know that for many people a death brings back old losses, as well. On the other hand, I think, who am I to define what the appropriate intensity of someone else's emotion should be? I do not like my arrogance. And it violates my social constructionist leanings. Perhaps Lisa's neighbor is a mother-figure for her. Maybe Lisa's capacity for love is greater than or at least different from mine. But I keep coming back to my sense that she's grieving for more than one person. I remember she told me that she could not help her neighbor because she burst into tears whenever she saw her. That fits with grieving for more than her neighbor. And if I put that together with my first impression that the depth of her affection feels like family love, I think that Lisa may have some unfinished business probably does have some unfinished business prior deaths, perhaps ungrieved, that surfaced with learning of her neighbor's impending death. And if that is indeed the case, unfinished business can be getting in the way of her desire to be supportive of her neighbor. So I go with my gut and ask her about her prior experi-

ences with dying persons. The sense of family love leads me to ask about family first.

Gale: Are your parents both alive?

Lisa: Yes.

Gale: How about your grandparents?

Lisa: I only knew one grandmother, and I loved her very much. My other grandparents died before I was born.

Gale: Did you go to her funeral?

Lisa: Yes, I did.

Gale: And did you cry?

Lisa: No. I couldn't cry. I didn't want her to be dead.

This seems to validate my hunch that Lisa is grieving for more than one person, that her unfinished business is that she did not grieve for her grandmother, that she is grieving for her grandmother now, along with her beginning grief over the impending death of her neighbor. I know about wishing for one last hour with someone who died before I got to say what I wish I had said when they were alive — my mother or to take back something I wish I had not said. So I tell Lisa what I think may be going on and I ask her if she would be willing to try something with me. She is willing, and I am delighted for the opportunity. I am going to try and give her a few last moments with her grandmother, and a second chance to grieve at the funeral. I'm excited. I'm intense. I'm ready.

I place three chairs side-by-side, in front of her, and lay a long coat across the three seats. I ask Lisa to imagine her grandmother lying there, still alive, but on the verge of death. To help her get a sharp image of her grandmother lying there, I ask questions

about what her grandmother is wearing, what position her arms are in, and so forth. Then I tell her to look at her grandmother and tell her grandmother everything she wants to tell her.

Lisa: Grandma, I love you. You've been so good to me. You always told me I was good when my parents said I was bad. You read to me. You colored with me. You held me in your lap and rocked with me even when I was nine years old. I want you to know I remember. I'll always remember. (Lisa's eyes fill with tears)

(Silence)

Gale: Is there more you want to say to her?

Lisa: Yes. Grandma, remember the day your little mirror was broken? I'm the one who broke it. I was angry because you were sick and wouldn't play with me. I'm sorry I did that. You were more like a mother than a grandmother to me. You always had time for me when nobody else cared. (Tearful silence) I'll miss you very much. (More tears, then silence.)

Gale: Is there anything else you want to say to her?

Lisa: No. (She touches the coat.)

Gale: Is it O.K. to let her die now?

I am rushing Lisa. I do not want her to lose her singular concentration on the fantasy we are creating. I do not know how long she can maintain this level of intensity. I stand very close to her. My voice is intense and urgent. I try to keep her energized with my own energy. It is good that I have a lot of energy and a sense of drama.

Lisa: (Sobs for several minutes.)

Gale: Is she dying yet?

Lisa: (Still sobbing.) No. I want to hold her hand.

Gale: Do it.

Again I am rushing her. My energy is finite, and I want her to hurry before my energy is used up!

Lisa: (Touches the coat again, then gets on her knees, buries her face in the coat and continues to cry.) This is the last time I'll see you, Grandma.

Gale: Is she beginning to die?

Lisa: (Crying; nodding.) Yes she's dying. (Pause.) She's dead.

Gale: (waits)

Lisa: (Crying gently.) My grandmother is dead.

I feel relieved. We can move to scene two now. In that moment I withdraw my energy from scene one and I am re-energized and ready to help Lisa focus intensely on the second phase of the work.

Gale: (Softly.) Now bury her. Take her to the corner over there (points.) and bury her. Use the sheet or the tarp if you want. (I move with Lisa to the corner.)

Lisa: (Carries the coat to the designated corner; gently lays it on the floor, then covers it with the sheet.)

Gale: Now perform a funeral service. Say a eulogy, then tell her goodbye.

My voice is again urgent. I want her to complete the work. I am afraid that she will lose her concentration and her train of thought will derail the potential for this enactment to have enough emotional reality to produce a lasting affect.

Lisa: You were the best grandmother I could have had. I'll miss you terribly. I miss you already (crying). Thank you, Grandma; thank you for your love. I needed it. I still need it. I wish you were

alive to give it to me now. You're not alive, though, and you don't have to worry about me. Your death makes me very sad...and my life will go on because I hold your love inside me.

(Silence)

Gale: Are you finished?

Lisa: (Nods; tears run down her cheeks.)

Gale: Now tell her goodbye, turn your back to the grave, and walk out of the room.

Lisa: (Looks at the sheet, then, softly) Goodbye, Grandma. (Turns and leaves the room)

I am tremendously relieved. I am also exhausted. I worked hard, and I think Lisa did sustain her focus in both scenes of the drama.

Gale: (Follows Lisa out of the room.) How are you feeling right now?

Lisa: Mostly, exhausted. Shaking a little, kind of like my muscles are twitching. Sad. I'm kind of sad, and kind of relieved, too. I can't believe I pretended my grandmother was alive all these years!

Gale: Now you've said your good-byes and you've allowed her to die. Let's see what happens with your neighbor this coming week.

Lisa leaves and I do not. I am still in the drama, but it is my own grandmother I am thinking about. I realize that I envy Lisa's relationship with her grandmother. I was never close to my grandmother. I feel profoundly sad about this. I cry. I momentarily resurrect her and tell her that I was too busy for old people. I feel ashamed. I realize that I have more work of my own to do, and I promise myself I will do it at a later time.

When Lisa comes back a week later, she says that she has been able to sit with her neighbor, prepare some food for her, and do some other little things without falling apart. She says that she still feels very sad, but that the sadness is not getting in her way. She says that she is still amazed that she mixed up her neighbor with her grandmother.

Three days later, Lisa phones to say that her neighbor has died, that she is very sad, and that she is O.K., too. She is not overwhelmed by her sadness. I am thrilled! I did it! It is several weeks before I can appreciate that Lisa did it.

I cannot wait to try redesigning the past with other willing clients. I feel bolder now, more willing to push. So when Sandra comes to see me with a more complex issue, of longer duration, I am ready.

DEEPER WATERS/BIGGER RISKS

I sit with Sandra, a woman in her early twenties. She tells me that she is afraid of men. Although she has no problem working with men, she has never dated and says she experiences nausea and dizziness whenever a man makes a personal overture toward her. So far, it sounds like panic to me.

I ask her when she first had this reaction, and she says it was as far back as she can remember. I ask if she means before she was 10. She said no, not that far back; maybe in junior high, about 12 or 13. She recalls a boy in her class asking her for a movie date and how sick she got. She says she

thought it was strange, because she and the boy were good friends, that they played baseball together and all kinds of things. I ask her if after this episode she continued to be friends with him and play baseball. She says no, that she couldn't stand to be around him afterwards, that she felt mad at him and afraid of him all mixed together. She says she knows it doesn't make any sense, but that was what happened.

I say that it sounds to me like something may have happened that hurt her or scared her before she was 12, and I ask her if, as a little kid, she had any bad experiences with men or boys. Given that at least one-third of all female children are molested before reaching age 18, I often ask this question. Sandra paused, then said no. I ask about her father, did she like him when she was a kid? She smiles and says yeah, that she was crazy about him. She says she used to watch for him coming down the street in his red truck and he'd stop and pick her up and let her ride in that real high cab with him all the way back to the shipping dock. Then she frowns, and there is a long pause. I say, You're frowning. She nods but doesn't speak. After several seconds I ask if she remembered anything. She nods again and looks disturbed. Again there is silence. Then Sandra says that she hasn't thought about it in a long time. She says she can't believe she forgot it, that she used to have nightmares about it. I ask her what happened, and she tells me that when she was about 7, when she was standing on the curb watching for her father's truck to come by, a red truck did

come by, so she started waving like she always did. But the truck didn't stop, so she ran after it. Then it did stop, and she ran around and opened the door and climbed in. But it wasn't her father, and the guy wouldn't let her get out. Her facial expression is pained and she starts to cry. She says the guy exposed himself and tried to make her touch him. That must have scared you, I say. She says it sure did, that when she finally broke loose of him, she ran home as fast as she could. I ask her if she told her mother what happened. She says no, that she just went up to her room and closed the door. She never told anyone.

My heart went out to her. How and why do children learn not to tell adults about the horrors perpetrated on them. How do we, as a society, as a world, communicate to children that they should not tell about abuses they endure because it must somehow be their fault, and/or that no one will believe them and, even more ludicrous to me, that they, the children, must protect not only the adult perpetrator who may have threatened them with further violence to themselves or those they love, but also the adults who are their parents, their aunts, their uncles from losing their romantic concepts about childhood. I ached for Sandra. No one comforted her. She went through the trauma and the nightmares all alone.

It certainly seems to me that the event Sandra described could have been at least one factor, if not a major factor, that led to the fear of men she was still experiencing. Based on many things I have learned from adults

who were physically and/or sexually assaulted as children and teenagers, as well as my review of the literature for use in a course I teach on social work practice with survivors of interpersonal assault, I think it quite possible that whenever a man approaches her now, she could be responding to the man in the truck long ago instead of to the man in front of her. So I tell Sandra what I think, and ask her if she would be willing to try something with me that may relieve some of her current fear of men. She says she is willing and I tell her we will try to reenact the scene and change it a little. She says she is scared but that she will try. I want her to try. I tell Sandra to close her eyes and picture herself at age 7, standing at the curb watching for her father's truck. I ask her if she is able to get the image, and she nods. To make the scene more vivid, I ask what she is wearing. She says shorts and a T-shirt from Purdue that her uncle gave her. I tell her to let the truck come into view now, and start to wave. I wait.

When I ask her if she's waving. She says, Yeah! I'm excited and I'm waving, but the truck isn't stopping. She looks perplexed. What are you doing now? I ask her. I'm running after it, she says. And I'm waving and yelling Daddy, Daddy. After a brief silence she says that the truck is going around the corner now, and it's stopping. I ask her what happens next, and she says she goes around to the passenger side, climbs up and... Her voice trails off and there's silence. I wait. Gale, she says, I don't want to get in! My heart's pounding real

fast! I say, Yeah. It'll be very painful for you inside that cab. And frightening, even though this is just a fantasy. She nods, and I wait. Then I ask her if she's willing to stay with it and bear that pain for a few more minutes.

I'm pushing her, and I'm a little uneasy about the pushing I'm doing. Is it for her or for me? I tell myself it's mainly for her, so I keep going, demanding and pushing and hopefully supporting her through it.

She says she'll try, but she isn't sure if she can. She's shaking visibly. I say that all anyone can do is try. Then, after a moment or two, I ask her if she has opened the door to the cab yet. She says she's doing that now. Then she says, I'm climbing onto the seat, and I look over, and that's not my father! She looks terrified and begins to cry. I try not to let her tears lead me or Sandra to stop.

After a few moments I ask her what the driver looks like. She says he's about 22 or 25; he's wearing a brown leather jacket, and his skin is bad. And I'm saying to him, she continued, Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you were my father. I feel really embarrassed, she tells me, and I start to get out of the cab, but...but...(tears) the guy won't let me (deep sobbing). I ask how he is stopping her, and she said that he grabs her left arm just above the elbow, and he pulls her back. She says she's scared and she's trying to break loose, but she can't. He's too strong. Now he's unzipping his fly, she says in a trembling voice, and then she whispers, He's pulling his penis out and he's trying to put my left hand on it. I ask her what she's feeling at this moment, and

she says she's getting dizzy, like she's going to vomit. She holds her hands over her mouth and actually heaves. I want to get out of here! She sobs.

But I do not back off. At this point I tell her I want her to stay there just a minute longer, and I want her to imagine that she is as big and strong as he is. I asked her if she can picture that. Yeah, she says, and her face registers some relief. I, too am relieved.

I was afraid she would stop. I do not want her to get stuck in the middle of the same old scene, newly reactivated. I want her to enact the drama through to its hopefully victorious conclusion.

What do you want to do to him, I ask her. She says she wants to punch him; she wants to pound him in the chest, and in a very angry voice she adds that she wants to punch him in the face! I tell her to go ahead and do it. I tell her there's a phone book on the seat next to her, and that while she's fantasizing, she can pretend the phone book is him and punch it. She starts punching it hard and fast. After several minutes I ask her if he's bleeding at all. She says he's bleeding a little from his nose and lip. I tell her to say anything she wants to while she is beating him up. She pounds and yells, "You rotten Bastard! I'm going to beat you to a pulp!" She continues beating on the phone book with both fists, hard and fast, for several seconds, then slows down, panting, and finally stops.



I ask her if the guy is dead. She says he's not just dead, he doesn't exist anymore! He's just a puddle with a leather jacket in it. Okay, I say. Now open the door on your side of the cab, get out, and close the door behind you. I ask her to tell me when she's done that. When she tells me she's out, I tell her to open her eyes slowly and take a deep breath. After she does this, I ask her how she's feeling. With a big grin on her face, she says she's exhausted, but great. Exhilarated. I am also exhausted and exhilarated. She says she really got him good. I agree, and I suggest to her that in the next few weeks she pay attention to whether she gets less dizzy or not dizzy and nauseated at all when a man next approaches her.

We keep in touch by phone for several weeks, and she reports little or no dizziness or nausea when two different men where she works ask her out. She even accepts one invitation and enjoys herself. We decide that any time she does feel a little of the old dizziness, she can visualize the puddle with the leather jacket in it. This seems to work for her, and over a period of time, the dizziness goes away entirely. She redesigned her past and made a better present for herself.

It has been suggested to me that the man in the red truck may well have been Sandra's father, himself, and the episode an incestuous one. While it is impossible to refute such supposition, for therapeutic purposes, as opposed to legal ones, the matter may be inconsequential. I think that what I did would have been applicable in either instance. Beyond my own impression, the

only evidence to disclaim incest here is the fact that Sandra continued riding in the truck with her father after the painful episode with one modification: She climbed up on the driver's side in order to look in, then ran around to the passenger door.

Reflecting on my work with Sandra, I see her strength to do what I demanded of her. I am relearning that people who need help are nonetheless strong people. I begin to appreciate my own strength when, years ago, I endured the demands of my therapist in order to make a better life in the present for myself. I am pleased for Sandra and for me.

On further reflection of my work with Sandra, I also see a me who energized much of the work with my own energy. I wonder if she knew that I did not know how it would turn out. My own boldness frightens me. I love the drama. I wonder if I am becoming an intensity junkie.

FIGHTING THE UNDERTOW

When I try fantasy work with Bonnie, who is 15, I am out of my depth. Bonnie's stepfather raped her several times a week from the time she was 9 until she was 11, when he was killed in an auto accident. She still has trouble sleeping. I propose a fantasy in which she is big and strong and has a baseball bat next to her bed. When her stepfather enters the room in her fantasy, she is going to pick up the baseball bat and bash him so he cannot rape her ever again. But she is unable to do it. In the fantasy, as it was in reality, she is immobilized the mo-

ment she visualizes the lighted end of his cigarette in the darkness of her bedroom. I see the lighted end of the cigarette, too. She is terrified. She is screaming. And I can't get her out of the fantasy! My heart is pounding.

I don't know what to do. My efforts to get her to pick up the baseball bat are futile. I try to get her to open her eyes and see she is not really back in that bedroom. She says she is trying to open her eyes, but can't. She knows me from some other work I've done at Childrens' Village where she lives and I know she likes me, so I try to hug her, hoping to comfort her and bring her out of the fantasy, back to the room we are in at present. But as I approach her, her terror increases, so I back off. I have done something stupid and terrible to this child and I can't undo it!

I think somehow I have to go into the fantasy and get her, but I don't even know what that means. Then I hear myself directing her to picture me kneeling on the floor beside her bed. I am yelling, hoping to be heard over her terror. Can you see me?! Can you see me yet?! She says she can't. She can't take her eyes off that cigarette. I tell her to reach out with her left hand. I actually kneel on the floor next to her chair so that if she can reach out her hand, I'll actually be able to grab it and she'll know I'm there. She reaches for my hand and I give it to her. I tell her to watch me pick up the baseball bat. I yell at her stepfather to back off or I'll kill him with it. I ask her if he hears me. He does, but he won't back off. I tell her I'm going to bash him, that I'm walking toward him now. I tell

her to watch me. Can you see me yet?! She can. She sees me bash him. Let's go! I yell. Let's run out of the room now that he's dead. I pull on her hand. She actually gets up and runs out of the room with me. Then I hold her while she sobs. Finally, she opens her eyes. I am sure three hours have elapsed. But the whole thing actually took place in less than 15 minutes.

Bonnie smiles. She is pleased. She says she now knows that he's really dead. It turns out that she has less trouble sleeping. She does not know that we were caught in an undertow. I know more about the sea of raw emotion that my use of gestalt techniques can generate. I am glad for Bonnie, glad she sleeps better now. But I vow to never again do anything like this with children or teens. My heart pounds even as I write this. I have never had a more frightening experience in all of my years in practice. And like Ramona's mine field stays with me, the lit end of Bonnie's stepfather's cigarette is now part of my life.

THE NEXT DIVES

Like Sandra, and to some extent Bonnie, Walter had a specific, unwanted reaction that began to get in the way of his present. I sit with him and he tells me that he visibly shakes in the presence of authority figures. He tells me that since he was rarely in their presence, he could explain away his occasional shaking as a function of being cold. Therefore, up until Walter was promoted, his shaking was not sufficiently problematic to warrant seeking profes-

sional help.

I know that many people structure their lives to accommodate long-standing, unwanted reactions like Sandra's nausea and Walter's shaking, and they never free themselves from it. Walter could have done that by refusing the promotion he had earned. But he accepted the promotion, despite his knowledge that he would be attending many weekly meetings with those holding top positions in the corporation. He accepted the promotion and sought psychological help.

Walter tells me that his father sexually abused him for many years, and that he tolerated it to protect his younger sister from similar abuse. That was the deal he and his father explicitly negotiated. What happened just prior to the onset of Walter's shaking that would cause most people to shake, but Walter did not? Walter discovered that despite his deal with his father, the father had begun to sexually abuse his younger sister. Walter called the police and pressed charges. He did not allow himself to feel his fear in doing this, because he thought his fear would interfere with doing what he needed to do. Before his father was released from jail, Walter left for college. That is when he began to shake in the presence of authority figures.

To try to alleviate his shaking around authority figures, I help Walter return, in fantasy, to the original situation with his father, and complete it in fantasy, this time, feeling the fear he dared not feel then, lest it stop him from taking action to protect his sister. This time he does shake as he stands against that original au-

thority figure, his father. And while his shaking does not entirely disappear as the result of our work together, it is reduced to a more manageable level.

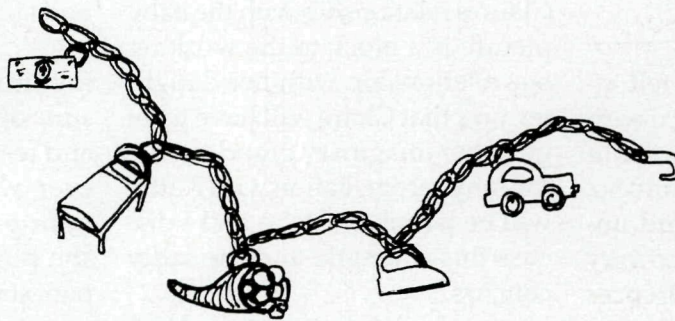
I find my work with Walter to be a much needed healing and humbling experience for me. My work with Bonnie left me doubting myself and my use of Gestalt techniques. I see now that I am still able to do it, but not always achieve dramatic results. I'm sad about that part. I got into the drama with Walter. I think that I put just as much energy into my work with him as I did with Lisa, Sandra, and Bonnie. And while I am not disappointed with Walter, I am disappointed with the outcome. Even though I know that dramatic success all the time is an unrealistic expectation, I feel let down. Walter, on the other hand, is very pleased with what he has achieved, and his smile is one of the ones in which I continue to live. So he had the outcome he needed and I, apparently, had the outcome I needed. Good-bye grandiosity.

DIFFERENT STROKES

It is with Arthur that I do my first post-grandiosity effort to help someone redesign part of their past. Arthur is a young man who was still tied to his abusive father, although he had neither seen him nor heard from him in several years. Arthur wants his father to realize that what he had done to Arthur was wrong. He wants his father to apologize for

all the hurts he inflicted and he wants his father to feel guilty.

When I ask Arthur to imagine his father in the chair across from him, he flinches. He is still afraid. The more vivid the image, the more frightened Arthur becomes. We talk briefly about Arthur having complete control over the fantasy, that it is his fantasy, that he can keep his fantasy/father from hurting him, or that he can allow his fantasy/father to hurt him if he wishes.



Arthur decides to talk with his fantasy/father only after imagining that his father's arms and legs are tied to the chair. Then Arthur tries to reason with his father. When I ask about his father's responses and facial expressions, Arthur says, None. He's not listening to me. He never did. I suggest he tell his father how he feels about not being listened to, and Arthur says it makes him feel like he doesn't exist.

Arthur has little energy of his own, but I do not try to energize him with my energy. I am neither intense nor immediate. I do not rush him. I do not know why. This is new behavior for me. I wonder if it is a sign of more patience or less investment. What I do know is that it just feels right to be laid back while Arthur

works at his pace. I am trusting my gut. It feels good.

For several sessions Arthur talks with his tied-up, imagined father, at one point seeing his father reach toward him with some affection. That is short-lived, however, and Arthur's fantasy/father goes back to not listening. Arthur gets nowhere except increasingly frustrated.

It is at this point that I suggest to Arthur that he acknowledge that he will never get what he has always wanted from his father, and that he tell this to the father in the chair in front of him, then walk away. With my direction, he tells this to his fantasy/father and sobs deeply for several minutes. Then he unties the fantasized father's arms and legs, and walks away from him. Arthur says he feels some relief and a lot of sadness. His smile is small and sad. We talk about the grief process to help him understand his feelings between sessions.

In retrospect, I think that Arthur did something very important for himself. He let go; he stopped hanging on. And once he did this, he was able to grieve for his father, who was ostensibly dead for him, then turn his attention to other issues.

Though I no longer wonder if I could have brought Arthur's fantasy to a happier conclusion for him, one in which he might have gotten what he wanted from his fantasized father, I did wonder at the time if I could have done it had I not been frightened by my episode with Bonnie

and humbled by my less than triumphant work with Walter, and if I had energized Arthur with my energy and urged him with my urgency. I no longer think that for two reasons. First, I've had other successful experiences with clients, some dramatic and some less so, sometimes using my urgency and sometimes being laid back. And second, I finally came to understand that Arthur was triumphant; letting go is a triumph!

DEEP WATER/BIGGER RISKS AGAIN

Some of the fear I felt after my traumatic experience with Bonnie has faded and I am willing to risk again with an adult. So, with Claire, I plunge in and immerse us both. Claire wanted very much to resolve her differences with her grown daughter, Kathy. Differences which resulted in silence between them for two years. I ask Claire to fantasize Kathy in the empty chair. Claire does it, opens her mouth to speak with Kathy, then shuts it without uttering a sound. She tells me that as much as she wants to talk with Kathy, she is still too angry to do so. I asked her what she is still too angry about, and she says, sobbing, she gave my grandson away! Claire takes out of her wallet out a picture of a newborn baby and shows it to me. This is my grandson, she says. He looks just like the Clarksons, my family. Claire says that Kathy was not married when she gave birth to the child and had given him up for adoption when he was four days old. Now he's living with strangers, Claire sobs.

I look at Claire's grandson

through her eyes, knowing that I am about to kill the relationship with my next sentence. But I do not hesitate. She will hurt, and she will cope. Then you don't really have a grandson, I say, my gut twisting as I say it. You have a picture of a baby. Yes! Claire shouts, Because of her! She points to the Kathy chair. When Claire is calmer, I ask her how long she has been carrying that picture around with her, and she says, Two years.

At this point I believe that Claire's relationship with the baby picture is a block to the work on her relationship with her daughter, and that Claire will have to let go of her imaginary grandson before any reconciliation with Kathy will be possible. Claire and I discuss this at length, and she sadly concurs.

I ask her to put the baby picture in the empty chair and tell the baby everything she wants to tell him. Claire has enormous energy of her own and she will not need mine. She tells the baby in the picture that she loves him and all the things she hoped they would do together. When I ask her if she is ready to say good-bye to him, there is urgency in my voice. It is a controlled urgency. I am not driven as I was in my earlier work using Gestalt techniques. Claire asks for a few more minutes. When the extra time is gone, she is still reluctant to say good-bye. So I asked her to own her decision by telling the baby picture that she is not going to let go of him. Tell him, I prompted, that you will keep him in your wallet so you can look at him and hate your daughter whenever you want to. I can still hear my voice saying

this. I was pushing her ahead, closer to a possible reconciliation with her daughter her expressed wish. I am not doing gentle work. I am in that sea of raw emotion again. No time or place for gentleness. One cannot float here. One swims. And at the moment I am reasonably sure of my strokes.

After taking my prompt and telling it to the baby picture, Claire says, You are only a picture. I wish you were really my grandson. I ask her if she is ready to say good-bye now, and she nods.

I kneel by her chair. I think my immediacy provides a measure of emotional support. I see and feel her pain. Despite it, however, when I hand her an aluminum pan and a box of matches, she puts the baby picture in the pan, strikes a match, says, Good-bye, baby, lets out a mournful wail, and puts the match to a corner of the picture. She is a brave woman. Through her tears, she watches the photo turn to ashes. At the end of the session Claire says she feels some relief as well as lots of sadness. She grieves for several days.

In subsequent sessions, Claire speaks with her daughter, Kathy, in the empty chair and responds as she thinks Kathy might when she changes chairs. After a month or so, Claire actually invites Kathy to dinner, greets her warmly (to Kathy's surprise, Claire reports) and begins the slow process of building a new relationship with her daughter.

My work with Claire is satisfying to me. I am less hesitant. I have more faith in the strength and resilience of human beings. I have a more reasonable perspec-

tive on the power I wield: I will not shatter lives with a phrase.

victories. I am not sure about no victory at all, but I know that I will find out as I continue. □

REFLECTIONS ON SWIMMING IN CHURNING WATERS

As I review and reflect on my journey over time, I am aware that I feel stronger, surer, and sadder. I know some things. I know that when I step into other people, I sometimes come out with pieces of their misery, haunting souvenirs like Ramona's mine field and Bonnie's stepfather's lit cigarette. I had to decide whether or not I was willing to have pieces of other people's misery inside me. I am willing. And I am no longer afraid that when I step into other people I will lose myself. The iffy-ness is gone. My sense of self is stronger for knowing that.

I know that raw pain, like the distilled pain that workers and clients deal with in ordinary therapies, is not something to be avoided. Like distilled pain, it is part of the process. My clients can cope with it, and so can I. I can also say the hard things that produce raw pain, like telling Claire that she does not have a grandson, just a picture of a baby. It twists my gut, and I can do it. I think that if saying hard things ever stops twisting my gut, it will be time for me to pack it in, time for me to retire from practice.

I know that I can use aspects of myself more deliberately: my energy, my immediacy, my urgency; my intensity. I have much better control of these aspects of self, and I can push or lay back, relying on my feelings to guide me. And I am less driven. I can live with and appreciate small

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