

THE GESTALT GROWTH EXPERIENCE

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An illusive image drawing my internal gaze is that of a varicolored, multitextured tapestry with each thread weaving its own path, describing the course of its own destiny, contributing to the vividness, the aliveness, and the rich complexity of the whole. Some threads show only little kinks in their straightness, slight shading to their hues, while others swerve and bend and double back, changing color as they change shape. Yet each highlights the other, the dark calling forth the light, the crooked requiring the straight, each strand part of the overall pattern which is called into being. No strand approaches the *ideal* of threadness, yet each contributes to the sense of wholeness intrinsic in a work of art. All are essential to the total patterning of the tapestry.

In just such a way do I see our individualities weaving through life. We choose our own paths, bend as we see fit, hew a straight course when we perceive our vision ahead, respond to our inner promptings and to the proddings of the environment; all this contributes to the larger whole of which we are a part. We have all entered the world with our unique set of predispositions, have responded to our unique situations, and have pursued our unique paths. We cannot assume nor judge, from this perspective, that any one path is better than another. We cannot see the necessity of perceived evil in calling forth

the good, nor the incompleteness of the good without the shadow of the evil. Even as we each pursue the course beheld in our visions, we cannot be sure that others, doing differently, are not also following theirs. We cannot see the bends and curves which guide another's choices. We need remember that no path is truly straight and that all the bends and curves and detours of our lives, as well as those of others, compose the richness of human life—the total picture beyond our grasp.

Each path is pursued through darks and lights and, except in relation to the whole, the darks and lights are not clearly seen. What is light in one perspective is dark in another, and the dark may yet yield to a vivid glow of light. For some, the mind shoots out spotlights ahead, checking the terrain, assessing the risks; only after the landscape has been illuminated does the self continue on its way—intellect preceding emotional investment. For others, the self proceeds, steadily sensing its way without peering ahead, absorbing the bumps and enjoying the smooth spaces, and only afterwards casting a light about in the place in which it stands. For these individuals the emotional-intuitive self explores first with the intellect following behind.

The balance of cognition and emotions and intuitions works its way in all of us—but not always in the same relationship, so for each the path is different. In this context, Fritz Perls' statement "Lose your mind and come to your senses" rankles a bit. Sometimes this is valuable advice, for the intellect can blind us—analyzing, categorizing, judging ahead of the event, and immobilizing us by our imagined fears. But at other times, "*Use your mind and come to your senses*" would better seem to describe our growth paths—or those of some of us. My point is that in our enthusiasm for embracing experience we ought not to neglect the important role of cognition. Intellect, as others have reminded us, can lead us to the door of experience though it cannot take us through. For others, or at other times, intellect rushes to the rescue, picking us up and dusting us off after we have fallen across the threshold of experience—

sometimes flat on our faces. My experience and that of some individuals in my groups and classes highlight this theme.

I often send out spotlights into my world, gathering up research, searching for evidence, trying to seek security in the path that lies ahead even though the light never shows true, never reveals all the shadows, never shows all the pitfalls of the path. But, even knowing this, I feel that the way is prepared and the chances I take are reasoned ones (or so I may assuage my fears). There are times, however, when I overrate the role of intellect, either moving forward too quickly or moving forward not at all. I may believe indeed that the spotlights I have beamed into the darkness reveal all, and plunge ahead only to find myself mired in new insecurities, new fears, feeling betrayed and set upon by every unexpected shadow. Or I may imagine that by checking out the future, by imagining the shadows and traps that lie in wait, I have no course but not to venture. At such times I might do well to *lose* my mind and return to my senses—to retrieve the balance that has been lost.

This is my path—for now. Lots of darks and lights, lots of turns and twists—sometimes certain of the vision that lies ahead, sometimes losing it altogether. The intensity of my pursuit yields to the intensity of my retreat—the one making way for the other. Some, perhaps, move in an evenly flowing manner in and among the collage of events, people, and experiences which help to shape their course. Maybe. Yet, at this moment such balance is foreign to me, but I do not deny its possibility. I see instead the extremes (and only eventually the balance), focusing on the singular emphasis on cognition or experience preceding a new integration. With all this, some specific examples, rooted in my experience, invite a second look.

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I think of *Bob* who always learns the theory first, who cautiously and intellectually allows himself to come closer to

his feelings. Yet in the gentleness of his own intellectual persuasion, he learns. His first discovery, analyzed cognitively, is meeting his own Topdog and Underdog and allowing them to be, as he analyzes Perls' autobiography, *In and Out of the Garbage Pail*. He needs ten pages of writing for his grade, and is finding them exceedingly difficult to come by. He begins as usual with a statement of his own inadequacies:

I always lose, and when I do my self-esteem goes way down—meaning that I have low self-esteem.

UNDERDOG: I want to stop.

TOPDOG: You have to go on, or you will fail.

UNDERDOG: What is so bad about that?

TOPDOG: You would not be able to accomplish all the great things you would like to do.

And later:

TOPDOG: You have to get ten pages.

UNDERDOG: You are playing a fitting game.

TOPDOG: You can say whatever you want.

UNDERDOG: I am tired of writing. I have discussed every topic I want to discuss.

TOPDOG: You know damn well there is a lot of content you did not cover.

UNDERDOG: I know there is a lot I did not cover, but all that other stuff I did not want to cover.

TOPDOG: What about your own experiences?

UNDERDOG: All right, you shouldist.

He continues with a personal vignette which merges into more dialogue.

I have a friend who gets in these toxic moods. I can always tell when she is in one. . . . She denies every word I say, even if it is in accord with her own views. She blows up at trivial things. She plays another game called "scapegoat," the scapegoat being me. All the problems of the world are my fault: hunger, poverty, racism, war, Idi Amin, the crucifixion, killing of whales, pollution, Watergate, Vietnam, etc.

UNDERDOG: I want to read.

TOPDOG: You have to finish this paper.

UNDERDOG: I do not want to. I do not like Perls because he is too surfacy. He plays a lot of games.

TOPDOG: And you do not?

UNDERDOG: Not as often as he does.

TOPDOG: Stop bullshitting.

Squeezing ten pages out of this is going to be like squeezing blood out of a turnip.

UNDERDOG: I am done now. I think I have got about ten pages.

TOPDOG: You should have not tried to get just ten pages. You should have written however many pages you needed to cover the whole book even the parts which did not interest you.

UNDERDOG: Stick it, Topdog!

And so Bob made his ten pages.

In the process he uncovered several new insights—not always owned. He talks about scapegoats and alludes to the fact that he was also his father's scapegoat . . . and a year later he realized he hated his father; a month later, that it felt good to be separate from his father; and a few weeks later, that he felt rather good about his father now—in his new independence—but wanted to hang on to his anger at him a little longer.

In addition, the written dialogue of the Topdog shows the demand for greatness, a greatness which if not achieved can only be realized in terribleness. For most of the time I knew Bob, he was terrible—he complained, he was incompetent (he said), he drove everybody crazy. He pointed out his relationship to Richard III who was born too ugly for sainthood so he worked hard at being a sinner. Last month Bob announced he was through complaining, and I've not heard him do so since. The slow emotional undercurrent had moved into the place cleared by his intellect. He has changed. Dark gave way to light as Bob's path came around a bend.

* * *

Sandy also leads with her head but when her emotional-intuitive self catches up, she sometimes doesn't appear to notice. She makes no sudden announcements. Instead, the intellect explores, questions, puts up defenses, erects a wall, takes down the wall; and gradually change occurs. A year ago Sandy was struck by the "Big Me" and the "Little Me," and acted out both in the world, with great discrepancies between. Often competent and forthright, she would retreat to seeking security in those who appeared "bigger" than she. She wrote of this often. She still writes of it. But change has occurred along the course her intellect prepared. She is more often "big"—not so often "little." She's more secure, more accepting of uncertainty—and yet she still struggles with the dichotomy. And yet she *lives* the dichotomy less. Soon her cognitive self will come to a new assessment. But not yet.

* * *

Mark is the most surprising person. With a strong topdog, like Bob's, he yet thrusts himself into new situations and just as impulsively leaves, threatened by his actions. But the experience has occurred, and later he recollects—cognitively yet emotionally, privately but later publicly. He brings together all dichotomies when he allows himself to process his explosive experiences. Mark recently wrote about his Gestalt experience—a theoretical and mildly experiential class and a more intensive group which he abruptly terminated. Yet the change occurred: an imbalance of emotional and cognitive experiences resulted in a new balance and a new growth. Though the catalyst was emotional uproar, the synthesizer was his intellect. After he falls down, Mark picks himself up. Unpredictably the darkness of Mark's path explodes in light.

As examples of his learning I will quote from two of his papers. The first excerpt explores his early perception of crisis when he met with a university counselor at the beginning of his group experience.

Now I am back with my crisis . . . what to do now. So I see that this present way of living will lead to my breakdown or even death. So I come to a therapist and I begin spilling my guts. As the other person listens and I speak, we both begin to see where the problems lie. This is sometimes called processing. It is also referred to as a "walk through hell." By God, it sure is a walk through hell . . . and it gets worse! Now, my therapist asks me to try out new ways of being.

The war is now full-fledged—fear is to be dealt with. Old ways of coping must be destroyed and new ways of "living" must be tried out. "But I refuse to die," cries the old self. "Remember how safe it is in here, Mark, quit this awful changing." "The old way is more secure," . . . THE ENDLESS, SCREAMING WHISPERS OF THE OLD SELF.

Several weeks later, having joined my group, Mark abruptly leaves but in a surprising recoup takes himself privately through this experience to resolution. He writes:

I am now aware of my experience in the Gestalt group. I am aware of feeling helpless, wanting to be rescued. I am aware of an anger towards the leader of the group, you Barbara! I am aware that I was not rescued, I did not get what I wanted, and I am now angry.

I am now aware of a self-directed anger at not expressing my anger, within the group setting. I am aware that this is a problem that will have to be dealt with at some other time. Wait a minute, why not deal with the anger now?

I am aware of a feeling of fright and helplessness, as I relive the group experience. I am now centered within the Gestalt group. It is the day I left in a fit of anger.

I am aware of coming today, with a specific topic to work on. Specifically, that is anger toward my parents. I am now bringing the subject up. I am aware that as I bring it up, that I want Barbara to mother me and lead me along very gently. Cringe. A thousand little particles of anger permeate me. My chest is being pierced by needles, fear and anger. Barbara is not responding the way I want. I think, "How can this woman do this. I am a good person, and she should know that. She should know that I am trying to grow, and treat me like a nice little

boy." She doesn't. I think, "My conviction about the world is confirmed. It is unfair. I am a good guy and the rest of them are all bad guys. I've known that all along, so why try?"

Now I am talking to this pillow who is my mother. I am making a half-hearted attempt to get into anger. It is not flowing or rather I am not flowing. Now I am aware of the rest of the group. I don't look up, they will see my fear and embarrassment. I am afraid. I am not getting into it.

Barbara is prodding me now, but not very gently. I do not like this. Who the fuck does she think she is to do this to me anyway? "Get fucked, Barbara," I think, but I don't say it. Saying that will blow my image of a nice, judicious, genteel, and all-around good guy.

I am tightening up even more. Barbara is not indulging me nor rescuing me and moves on to someone else. "Goddamn you, Barbara, you are no longer nice in my book," I think to myself. I am really angry now. "Fuck you, fuck you, etc., etc. . . ." But I still sit and stew. I do not express any of this.

Someone else starts to speak. I sit, growing more angry. I think, "I will spill it somehow. I'll get even! This fucking group, this fucking world. I am a good, aware person, don't they see that! I'll fix them!!"

I am getting angrier and angrier. Now another woman begins to speak. Aha, I'll pounce on her. So I lash out at her, and as I do this, I am gripped by fear. I am now aware of the spotlight being on me. . . . I feel out of place, I KNOW everyone hates me. My whole body is getting hot, my face is on fire. Now, Barbara asks me to elaborate on my attack. I feel attacked. "Now they're all going to gang up on me, just like always," I think.

I grope for words. I stumble for a defense. There is none. I am making an ass out of myself.

Now I say nothing and the spotlight shifts again. I sit, I stir, I stew, I cannot relax. I think, "What the hell happened?" I am overcome with anger, fear, hurt, embarrassment; what seems like the whole gambit of negative human emotions. Time is like an eternity now, each second seems like an hour, each moment I sit it seems like hours upon hours. A thought screams inside: "This group thinks you're a total asshole and I agree." Palms sweating, thoughts, feelings all going a mile a minute. "Run, Mark, run!"

I get up. A wounded, angry, and resentful Mark is going to leave. "I'll show them they can't do this to me and get away with it. I'll quit everything, school, this group, the assertiveness group, the internship, life itself."

I get up and Barbara asks, "Are you leaving?" I snarl back an Uh-huh. She says she feels bad about that and wants me to deal with my feelings here. As I walk out I say, "Tough shit."

I have now relived that experience and some afterthoughts come to me. I am aware that I set the whole thing up. I am aware that I have been used to playing a martyr, an outcast, the one to get shit on. I am aware of the origins of this. From what I know of my parents' early life, they too played martyr roles. They too were often on the outside looking in. To a certain degree, this way of interacting in groups I have picked up from them. They are not to blame but I blame them anyway. Now where does that leave me? It leaves me with a perfect scapegoat, and a lot of anger and no solution to the problem.

ENOUGH REHASHING, RATIONALIZING, INTELLECTUALIZING. IT IS DONE, LET IT BE!

So here I am! I am aware of the dynamics of the problem. I worked on it a little bit. I faced it. I tippy-toed up to experiencing it—but not fully. That's OK. Yet, now I am aware of a lost feeling. I feel sad, a sort of melancholy, aimless, drifting, in a sea of hopelessness.

However, I have made progress. . . . That is all I can ask. I stop . . . I ponder the growth I've made in the past year. Goddamn, I have come a long way. I have slain many problems, I have searched, and explored, and tried a lot of things out. Even so, beyond all that, I'm OK. . . .

I feel better now. I do not have to win today. It really doesn't matter. . . . It really doesn't matter if you win today . . . the answer lies straight ahead and it was a gas to find the answer lies straight ahead. Better said the answer lies here and now. I stop and put on a record. . . .

DANCING	DANCING	DANCING!!!
L I	S T	E N
FLOWING	FLOWING	FLOOOOOWING. . .
I FEEL FREE		

ENERGY	ALIVENESS
NOOOOOOOOOOOOW	NOW!

I feel overcome with positive emotions about me, people, life itself.

I have relived that experience which I thought was so horrible. I bet if I had hung in there with the group I could have worked through the experience. Next time. That sounds like the old topdog thing: improve, improve, improve. So-be-it. Mr. Topdog is still here. I accept him. He'll leave in time. This is life.

Mark's reliving of his experience was touched off by reading an article about a passive patient who wanted/demanded the therapist's help in solving a problem which she herself was refusing to confront. In part, Mark's passivity is the result of a very strong Topdog which demands perfection or nothing else. When faced with less than perfection, Mark turns to others to help him achieve it, at the same time daring them to fail as he has done, thus proving that the world is a lousy place after all. So indeed it was a victory for him to accept his less-than-perfect resolution of his problem with the group/therapist (read "other groups/authority figures") and allow himself a respite from having to be perfect—and enjoy the success of the moment.

Mark *feels*—but the key to his struggles has been a *cognitive* one: his ability to write and to write well, which provides security in what is often a terrifying world. For Sandy and Bob, too, as for myself, the intellect paves the way and picks us up after we have fallen and allows us to stabilize our world once more.

Stability without change would be stultifying and only illusory. Yet change—"flowing," as Mark says—without stability would leave many of us adrift in an insecure universe. The intellect—our ability to cognitively arrange our worlds—gives us the base from which we either leap or tippy-toe into new explorations. For many of us, at least in our present stage of growth, the intellect is the road to growth. I know the sterility of cognition alone; but cognition which does not

encapsulate our aliveness but gives us the framework in which to move forward, which provides that ounce of security for the next adventure, is a necessary part of our experience. Whether we need to lose our minds or to use them, whether we lead with our hearts or our heads, we need to utilize all our capacities as we weave our tapestry of life.

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