

10th EAP Convention in Lisbon (Portugal) 2 - 5 July 2009

« *Meanings of Happiness and Psychotherapy* »

PLANTING FLOWERS RATHER THAN PULLING OUT WEEDS

by Serge GINGER (Paris)



Psychologist; Psychotherapist, trained in Psychoanalysis, Gestalt Therapy and EMDR
Founder of the *Paris School of Gestalt (École Parisienne de Gestalt, or EPG)*
and of the *International Federation of Gestalt Training Organizations*
(*Fédération Internationale des Organismes de Formation à la Gestalt, or FORGE*)

Professor of Neurosciences at the *Sigmund Freud University (Paris)*
General Secretary of the *Fédération Française de Psychothérapie et*

Psychanalyse (FF2P)

President of the *European Training Accreditation Committee (TAC) for Training*

Institutes for Psychotherapy, of the European Association for Psychotherapy (EAP).

As a general rule, one enters into psychotherapy to find a remedy to psychological or psychosomatic *suffering*. Otherwise it is referred to as “personal development” or fulfilling one’s latent potential.

Certainly no therapy can avoid tears or anguish: lancing an abscess is usually painful ... even if it is often necessary! But must we first begin therapy by dwelling on the *difficult* moments of our past, when we can also, at the same time, recall *happy moments* already experienced, cultivate to the maximum our present, and develop our actual and future happiness?

A complete therapy is not limited to the process of *cleansing our wounds*. Its aim is also to discover — or re-discover — a “*joie de vivre*”, a natural joy leaning towards more happiness.

This is notably emphasized in approaches called “*humanistic*”, such as Gestalt Therapy and EMDR – two approaches that I associate regularly in my present day practice.

Analyzing Success

My clients in Gestalt Therapy are generally very *surprised* when I tell them *explicitly* that it is often interesting to analyze the *causes and consequences* of their *successes* as much as their failures, explore their joys as much as their suffering, in order to be able to reproduce them when necessary, and even *amplify* them. In this way, they discover that they can “work” on a success, on a rich contact, or analyze their feeling of well-being, and not limit themselves solely to tackling problems or traumas. Indeed, going back to a bad period over and over again, only *reinforces the memory*, fixing the neurological encoding; evoking a painful period of mourning is not enough to move beyond it... If we are always picking at the wounds of our childhood, they will never be able to heal: once the wound has been carefully cleansed (but not before!) the scab can form naturally, and mustn’t be torn off.

Beginning treatment is often painful; but soothing ointments of tenderness and humor

are also part of the treatment. *Neuroscience* has underlined the importance of “neurotransmitters of reward” and of well-being: dopamine, noradrenalin, endorphins, oxytocin... It has been shown that a few minutes of positive mental visualizations increase the resources of our immune system... by 53%!

Similarly, EMDR rapidly stimulates a re-organization of our information system, and mobilizes the natural process of mental and neuronal healing.

In today’s world, we put a greater value on *preventive* medicine: no longer must we await suffering before beginning treatment. Therapy is also constantly seeking harmony, a better “quality of life”. We all have *the right to be happy*.

Our traditional education, inspired by Catholicism — re-enforced by Freudian pessimism — has accustomed us to the idea that “Paradise must be merited”. Reward comes only with hard work: “No pain, no gain”; “You have to suffer to succeed”; “You will bear children in pain”.

All this has yet to be proved!

Personally, I do not detect any particular merit in *asceticism, suffering, sacrifice*; and the morality of Saint-Benoit is alien to my way of thinking, he who only sees saints among the martyrs, and who asserts that “death is situated on the doorstep of pleasure” (Rule N° 7) and that we “must go through every painful and austere experience in order to reach God” (Our path to God is paved with painful and rough stones) (Rule N° 58).

I feel closer to Orthodox Christians — whose celebration of Easter and the joy of the Resurrection is more important than the Passion of the Crucifixion; closer as well to certain oriental Sufis who “dance the Joy of the world”. “Several roads lead to Wisdom, they say, when you seek, seek in Joy...”

I am in agreement with Professor Max Pagès, a French psychotherapist, when he says: “Contrary to what Freudian technique prescribes, the *pleasure* experienced by *the therapist* in his/her exchanges with the client is *necessary* for change. It is not harmful: nor is it a suspicious element that must be eliminated or accepted with reluctance and a bad conscience. It is truly *the motor of change*”.

Is it necessary to remind ourselves, by the way, that pleasure and love are not synonyms of *sexuality*? The word “sexuality” was not invented until the 19th century and first came into its present day use in... 1924! A lot has gone by since!

The Greeks, with more nuance, used three totally distinct words when referring to love:

- *eros*: desire, symbolically located in the body or sex organs;
- *agape*: affection, brotherly connotation, located in the heart;
- *philia*: love or interest (for a friend, music, truth) located in the head.

At the beginning of the 19th Century, the economics theory of libidinal Freudianism postulated that drives were *quantifiable* energies, based on the model of classical thermodynamics of the time, dominated by “Carnot’s second principle” (loss of energy through *entropy*). According to Freud, the mechanisms of neurosis, such as sublimation, are implicitly based on the physical laws of fluids: energy is assumed to be *limited*: it can only be re-directed or transformed, but not multiplied. Thus, for example, unused sexual curiosity is metabolized, and would be the source of art and science.

However, Love is comparable to *Fire* and not to *Water*; it does not follow the principle of *communicating vessels*, but rather that of a *flame* — which can multiply without limit, and which loses nothing having existed. The Malthusian energy concept is no longer applicable: conserving water is not what counts: what counts is maintaining the flame — while avoiding getting burned!...

Love, tenderness and sex do not wear out with use... quite the contrary!

The duty of happiness

What good is scraping our fingers when pulling out the weeds, or constantly turning over the earth of our inner garden, to remove all the stones? In any case, we are exhausting ourselves in vain: *the more we dig, the more stones we find!* Despite all my efforts, there will always be stones in my earth! What if I saved my energy — to water my flowers? Even planted some... even on rocky soil!

Everyone knows that it is easier to develop a quality one possesses already: a talent for music, sports, an ability for spontaneous contact... rather than fight in vain against one's "negative" traits: stopping smoking, being less lazy, less jealous, etc.

Let's not avoid suffering... or joy. Psychotherapy's aim is the fulfillment of the human being. Let's not cultivate the popular *therapeutic masochism* of the moment, which assumes that the more therapy is long, expensive and painful, the more it is supposed to be "profound and valuable"! "Not expensive = not good"; "Not long = not profound", continue to be persistent myths.

At the market, the same sack of potatoes is divided into two different crates (two boxes) and sold for 2 Euro and 4 Euro. Most people will buy the more expensive ones — on the assumption they are better!

A recent American survey of 80 statistical studies on the real effects of different therapies showed *no significant correlation* between the length, the price and the observed results, neither short term nor long term.

Psychotherapy can help *clean up certain nasty consequences* of a painful past, but it is not necessary to tie up all the loose ends, continuing for months or years; when you have cleaned out most of the clutter in the cellar, it is time to fix up the ground floor, which is where you live, and enjoy your house. That is where you will *find new energy* and it will always be possible — later — to finish the cleaning, in small steps.

This life energy is carried out in joy and pleasure and not only in effort.

The best you can do for someone you love is to be happy yourself

Alain (in *Propos sur le Bonheur*, 1925)

In this way, we offer as a *gift* to those dearest to us, the presence of someone at ease with himself, instead of crushing them under our devotion or our sacrifice. They bask in our sun. It is no longer a question of "the *right* to be happy," but the "*duty to be happy*," an *altruistic* duty to radiate.

In addition, this contributes to working with pleasure, warmth and joy. It is obvious that what we do pleurably, we do better — this being true as much for the client *as for the therapist*.

The absolute *neutrality* of the therapist is a myth, partially out-dated, which is no longer supported by contemporary psychoanalysts. Besides, non-intervention is already taking a position often strongly influential, and the withdrawal often alienates more than the "intervention."

In addition, it must be emphasized that the therapist's inner responses are not only *responses* to the client — as supposedly implies the term "counter-transference", understood as a *reaction*, positive or negative, from the client onto his/her analyst. Added to these crossed transferences, of course, are the feelings born during the *real relationship* between the two partners in the therapy.

I must admit that I do not regret at all this intricate weaving of diverse relationships, woven in every direction with threads both invisible and brightly colored, a mysterious mosaic. It is an unfathomable richness of human relationships, giving body, density and originality, constantly renewed.

Transference rightly underlines the importance and intensity of the experiences of the

past and the tendency to *repeat* behaviors; but we must not overlook the immense potential for *creativity* — which enable each one of us to get out of the rut we have created for ourselves.

Roots come from the tree

The search for roots is no doubt often enlightening, but let's not forget that — contrary to popular belief — the tree does not come from its roots, but rather from a seed: on the contrary, *roots come from the tree*. Each day, they grow deeper into the earth, spreading out, to support the branches. The development of roots is thus an *on-going* and permanent phenomenon, happening in the *here-and-now* and in a creative *interplay at the contact-boundary between the tree and its environment* — two themes central to Gestalt Therapy.

What we need is a paradigm shift: letting go of “mathematical,” repetitious pessimism (from the Greek “*matema*” — which means: that which is *already written*, the truth *of the past*) and embracing the optimistic, exuberant “poetry” of life (from the Greek “*poiein*” — which means “*create*”).

An example of a change of perspective

I will conclude these reflections on the research of happiness in therapy with a *brief example* taken from a Gestalt therapy group: a tearful mother talks about the brutal death of her 17 year old daughter, which happened accidentally several years ago, and which she has never got over. The situation is re-enacted as a psychodrama with symbolic overtones. A young woman from the group plays the dead daughter, and speaks from her grave:

“Mother, I don't understand why, for so many years, you *only* remember a few moments of my *death*, instead of savoring with me the 17 years of happiness we have shared during my lifetime. So many happy memories you seem to have forgotten! And yet it's that which is essential between us — *my life and not my death!*”

This spontaneous expression from one participant, deeply moved the mother — and enabled her to “instantly re-open her daughter's *photo album*”, and tell the group about many moments of *joy* shared with her daughter. This public expression of *happiness* turned out to be more therapeutic than going on and on about an unfinished mourning.

Smiling, laughing, joy and happiness mobilize the *five main dimensions of Human Being*: physical, emotional, cognitive (humor), social (sharing) and spiritual (the meaning of life), in accordance with the five branches of a *Pentagram* — which I adopted as a symbol of Gestalt Therapy.

Thank you for your attention.

Serge Ginger
<s.ginger@noos.fr>