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GESTALT THERAPY WITHOUT TECHNIQUES: A SESSION WITH SUE

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As the title of this paper implies, the session presented here is one devoid of popularized Gestalt therapy techniques. The session is exemplary of Resnick's (1984) statement, "Every Gestalt therapist could stop doing any Gestalt technique that has ever done and go right on doing Gestalt therapy." This session highlights the important Gestalt therapy goals of increasing awareness and expanding contact boundaries.

This was my first session with Sue. I had interacted with her socially for a brief period the previous day. Sue reported that she had been in therapy previously. Sue is a tall, athletic looking, 32 year old woman. One of my first impressions was of how healthy she looked.

I have used two dashes (—) to indicate pauses in the session, where I think it necessary I have indicated the length of the pause. My comments are included so that the reader can have some idea of

what I think is going on, to comment on some aspect of Gestalt therapy theory or application, or to add some information that I think may be helpful.

This session exemplifies my style of working in the present and demonstrates the fertile possibilities of this style. There are places in the session when it would have been easy to get into an explanation, discussion, or to end up talking about. I avoided that most of the time in order to stay focused on the “now.”

I don't think I led or pushed Sue at any time during the session. Most of the focus is on what she *is* doing. I seldom asked her to be or do anything other than what she was doing; the exception is the experiment with her eyes.

Session With Sue

Bob: Hello — I'm imagining that you're cautious and hesitant to start with me this morning.

Sue: I'm thinking that I've usually had a dream, I've had a ticket of admission to work, and I would like to experiment with having a session without having anything specific to work on.

Bob: What is your experience now of having nothing specific?

Sue: Well, I'm looking at you. It looks to me as if you are not looking at me. Are you looking at me?

Bob: Yes, I'm looking at you — so, when you're not specific what happens is that you imagine I'm not looking at you.

Sue: Yes, — you look like you're looking at my left eye.

Bob: I'm moving around Sue; I'm looking at different parts of your face and you.

Sue: Oh, —

Bob: If you would be willing I'd like you to look around, to look at different parts of me.

Comment No. 1: At this point Sue's eyes seemed “locked” on mine. I imagined she was squeezing or forcing herself to look at me and in the process had lost contact with the ground and only

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my eyes were figural for her. So I requested her to loosen her gaze and to take in more with her vision.

Sue: Okay — (she did some looking).

Bob: What is that like for you?

Sue: I liked doing that. I liked just looking at you.

Bob: I was fantasizing that you were locked on my eyes and paying attention to or noticing anything else.

Sue: Um hmm, when I started looking at you I noticed your lines right here (pointed to her face). I noticed your curly hair (laughed). I noticed the way you're sitting and your socks — (she looked at me expectantly).

Comment No. 2: We seemed to be trading sentences. This was a pattern I wanted to avoid so I decided to disclose what I was feeling and imagining.

Bob: I'm feeling left dangling. My hunch is that if I don't come in with something I will be left hanging.

Sue: By me?

Bob: By me or by you, I don't know.

Sue: I feel apprehensive and tension sort of holding my arms and planting my feet on the floor. There's a tightness in my chest.

Bob: (I noticed that her chest was barely moving.) Are you breathing?

Sue: A little.

Bob: Would you be willing to do some breathing now? (She breathed deeply several times and I thought I noticed something.) As you exhale I imagine you're shaking your head just slightly.

Sue: Oh (went back to deep breathing).

Bob: What do you notice?

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Bob: Do you feel protective about this area of your chest at this moment?

Sue: Yea, I feel it is a vulnerable part of my body. I feel vulnerable there.

Bob: What could I do to that part of your body?

Comment No. 4: Again, I wanted to stay with her existential experience. She had just disclosed something very personal to me. What I wanted to stay with were the feelings she had now and what effect this "heart problem" had on her now. I wanted to avoid stories about this. My question tended to focus on our interaction and what impact I might have had on her.

Sue: What could you do — well.

Bob: What I'm in touch with is that you have been remarking about this part of your body the last few minutes and at times you feel dead there; now you feel not flowing, you had open heart surgery and you feel vulnerable. I'm wondering if you have some fantasies about what we might do here. (She started crying.) I'm noticing your tears at this moment.

Sue: I cry a lot, I don't know why. I think it must be tension relief. (She smiled at me while still crying.)

Comment No. 5: What was foreground for me was the split between her eyes and her mouth. Also, I imagined she would have given many reasons for her crying; none of which would have been as productive as staying with her crying and how she experienced her self.

Bob: What I'm paying attention to is your eyes are crying and your mouth is smiling when you told me that.

Sue: (She nodded her head in agreement.)

Bob: Have you any fantasies, Sue, about what I might do, or if I might do something to you here? (I was referring to her chest area.)

Sue: It wouldn't be that you would physically do anything to me there, but that — that's my vulnerable spot. If you see that part of me then you have touched a weak part, a vulnerable part of me and I'm exposed to you and vulnerable to you.

Bob: So you would like for me not to touch your weak part and for you not to be exposed to me. That would make you feel even more vulnerable.

Sue: It is painful to have you touch the part of me I feel is vulnerable.

Bob: How do you know that?

Sue: Because I'm crying right now. I feel vulnerable right now.

Comment No. 6: I imagined this to be a myth and I asked for evidence. Here, I was very aware of her crying and obvious pain. I could have focused my attention on this and decided not to. I was interested in learning something and imagined there was more for her in checking out this "myth;" so I persisted along this line.

Bob: How do you know it is painful for me to touch your weak part?

Sue: — all I know is that just talking about it I cry (sobbing). I don't know whether that's painful or not (she contorted her face and bit her lip as if to stop crying).

Bob: I'm not experiencing touching your weak part. I'm in touch with your crying. I imagine that to be something other than me touching you in a vulnerable place.

Sue: — could you be more specific? I mean, could you give me your fantasy about why I'm crying?

Comment No. 7: I was not intentionally being evasive. I had no fantasy about why she was crying. Even if I did I doubt if I would have gone into it. We were working well at this point and I didn't

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want to interrupt our working with a guessing game about why she was crying.

Bob: No, — I wonder what you are in touch with at this moment?

Sue: I feel more alive.

Bob: Maybe I *have* touched you a little bit there, and don't feel pained, you feel more alive right now.

Sue: Right.

Bob: What do you think of that? That doesn't seem to fit your myth — . What are you doing now?

Sue: Um — I feel sort of embarrassed now.

Bob: Embarrassed about — .

Sue: Crying.

Bob: What I said was that maybe I had touched your weak part and you felt some life there which is contrary to what you predicted. I asked you what you thought about all that, you seemed withdrawn to me and what you tell me is that you are embarrassed about crying.

Sue: — it's true it's not painful. But it is painful, I feel pain in exposing myself to you.

Bob: Where?

Sue: I feel uncomfortable.

Comment No. 8: Sometimes I believe it is important to accurately label what is going on. So I wanted to know precisely where she felt pain. What she discovered was that she was uncomfortable and this seemed to fit.

Bob: I believe that you feel uncomfortable, — you have a squeezed look, you seem to be fearful at this moment, that's my fantasy.

Sue: (She nodded.)

Bob: Is that what you experience?

Sue: No, I don't feel fear.

Bob: What do you feel?

Sue: Um, I feel, I feel myself locking myself into your eyes. I lock myself into your eyes and the rest of the room fades out.

Bob: — Now, when you lock yourself into my eyes what do you experience?

Sue: It is a way of spacing out. I feel, I feel like I lock myself into your eyes and I just sort of space out, I sort of go blank.

Bob: Would you do the opposite of what you are doing now?

Sue: (She looked around, reached for a Kleenex.) When I do the opposite I look around, I look at all of you, not just at your eyes.

Bob: Somehow you have a way of locking yourself in on my eyes, becoming inflexible and not knowing what's out there and feeling spacy. When you allow your eyes to move you start feeling differently.

Sue: Yes, when I allow my eyes to move around I feel just right here.

Bob: If you want to be not right here, then you can lock in on my eyes.

Sue: Um hmm — .

Bob: What is happening?

Sue: I was just flashing between locking in on your eyes and not. When I look right at your eyes I start doing that locking.

Bob: You appear to come up in your chair some when you talk about locking in on my eyes.

Sue: (She looked puzzled.) — I was just thinking when you said what could I do to you there (pointed to chest), that set off these tears (started crying), but I don't know why.

Bob: I'm not very interested in your not knowing why. I am interested in how you set your tears off right now. What could I do to you?

Sue: (More crying and shaking of her head.) I have a fantasy of saying you couldn't do anything to me I wouldn't let you do.

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Bob: I'm having a different fantasy. What could you do to me?

Sue: What could I do to you? — I just flashed that is your heart and I could hurt you, I mean if you let me I could hurt you in your heart.

Bob: What could be another possibility?

Sue: I could make you feel good.

Bob: Yeah, — seems to me as if you lock in in many ways, you lock in to my eyes and you lock in with one choice and give yourself no others. The only thing you are aware of is "I could hurt you;" there are other possibilities.

Sue: Yes, that's true.

Bob: — What's going on?

Sue: Something a previous therapist said to me just flashed into my mind. One time I said that if I ended the present relationship I was having I would never find another one and he said he didn't believe that.

Bob: What happened, did you end that relationship?

Sue: Yes, and started another one right away.

Bob: Again your myth, what you said to yourself didn't turn out.

Sue: Right.

Bob: So you opened your heart to somebody else?

Sue: It just happened.

Bob: You had nothing to do with it (jokingly).

Sue: It was a surprise.

Bob: I experience you as more open to me at this moment. I feel more open also.

Sue: Yeah, I feel warm toward you right now.

Bob: — I'd like to come back to here (pointed to my chest) and ask you if your warmth is from here to here.

Sue: Yes, I feel air and aliveness there. When I first came in I didn't.

Bob: You look pained again.

Sue: No, — I'm thinking of this relationship I'm starting and during this session I'm seeing myself as an emotional person. I never saw myself as that before.

Bob: Is that OK with you?

Sue: No (tears and shaky voice).

Bob: What's your objection?

Sue: I associate crying with weakness. I want to be composed.

Bob: That's not what you are doing at this moment. — With this new person, this new relationship, you want to be nonemotional and composed?

Sue: No, mostly in this therapy session.

Bob: With me you want to be nonemotional and composed?

Sue: Right.

Bob: What could happen? What's happening to you right now? You are emotional, right? (She nodded.) How is that for you?

Sue: I imagine you would see me as emotional.

Bob: I do (she laughed).

Sue: I mean like a silly woman.

Bob: I don't — I'm wondering what your fantasy is of me if I see you as an emotional and a silly woman. You evidently don't want me to see you that way.

Sue: That's right.

Bob: How do you want me to see you?

Sue: I want you to see me as courageous and centered.

Bob: Courageous I know something about, when you say centered I don't know much about what you mean.

Sue: Accepting myself, in touch with myself, and calm; relating to you nonhysterically.

Bob: I see you as relating to me and emotional and not accepting parts of yourself. That's my experience of you so far.

Sue: (Crying.) I wonder where all this sadness comes from. Sometimes I just feel like I could cry for days.

Comment No. 9: My hunch here was that she didn't listen to me very well. When I was talking she had switched to something different. I could have explored that or waited to see if it happened again. I chose to wait and stayed with what was going on.

Bob: How long do you feel like you could cry right now?

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Sue: I could cry the rest of this session easily (started laughing when I looked at my watch).

Bob: That would give you 20 minutes. — Are you sad at this moment?

Sue: — No, right now I'm not sad.

Bob: You cried about 5 seconds (she laughed at this). What's going on?

Sue: That just made me laugh, I don't feel sad right now.

Bob: That's the third time I'm aware that you have made a prediction about yourself and it hasn't come true.

Sue: — Uh huh, when Cindy said she saw sadness in my, that made me feel sad.

Bob: Cindy said this to you in group?

Sue: Yes. I don't know what that sadness is.

Bob: Are you sad at this moment, Sue?

Sue: No, I'm not sad right now.

Bob: What are you.

Sue: I feel relaxed right now.

Bob: Could you make yourself sad?

Sue: Make myself sad? — No, that feels artificial to me. I suppose I could have a fantasy and try.

Bob: You could say to me now you won't feel sad. You are willing to talk about it and you won't feel sad.

Sue: I won't think about something to make myself feel sad.

Bob: Often you seem to make yourself feel sad or puzzled, and don't know why, that's pretty consistent and the implication is that you should know why. What's happening to you when you listen to me?

Sue: It rings true for me. —

Bob: What's going on?

Sue: I was just wondering why I do that.

Bob: Are you sad now that you are wondering why you do that?

Sue: No, — tears are funny. When I worked with Cindy yesterday, the fear of working with her I'd gone over beforehand and then the build up of tension I felt the tears coming on. I felt they were related to that, just that, tension.

- Bob: You equate your tears with a release of tension for you.
- Sue: Yes.
- Bob: One way not to be a hysterical woman is to stop tensing yourself.
- Sue: (Nodded) Right.
- Bob: It was my fantasy that when I said that to you that you begin to tense.
- Sue: Yes, yes I did; that's something to think about (laughed).
- Bob: I'm noticing you go here (points to chest where she is stroking herself) when you say that's something to think about. Would you do that some more please? — What is that like for you?
- Sue: Like soothing myself.
- Bob: I am interested in what you're doing. You are talking about thinking and your hand goes here around your heart. That is not where you do your thinking. — What are you aware of doing now?
- Sue: Just touching myself here.
- Bob: What's happening here now (I indicated the area of her chest where she was touching herself)?
- Sue: It makes me bring up sadness.
- Bob: *It* makes you bring up sadness.
- Sue: I feel sad, I touch myself here.
- Bob: That's different than weakness for me. The sentence that's running through my head is, "I'm relieved to be alive, I still don't believe that I survived that surgery." Would you like to try that on?
- Sue: I'm relieved to be alive and I still don't believe that I survived that surgery.
- Bob: Would you say that again please?
- Sue: I'm relieved to be alive and I still don't believe I survived that surgery (her words flowed easily and seemed synchronized with her breathing).
- Bob: What happens to you as you say that to me?
- Sue: I experience this feeling of excitement here (pointed to chest).

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Bob: As you were saying that I felt fluttery through here, through my chest.

Sue: I've never said that before (cried). That makes me feel joyous to say that. I don't know why.

Bob: What you do know is that you feel joyous.

Sue: Yeah — I feel a co-mingling of joy and sadness about that.

Bob: I don't know about your — about that. I believe you that you feel a co-mingling of joy and sadness.

Sue: Yea, yeah, —

Bob: I'm mostly aware of your face at this moment. You don't look joyous, I imagine there's sadness there.

Sue: I feel joyous from here to here (pointed from eyes to chin) and I feel a heaviness from here upward (eyes to top of head), sort of weighing on my head.

Bob: I imagine that's probably your whys or your about thats (said teasingly). What I am doing is trying to brainwash you into giving up your myths. (Jokingly) You don't want to do that, do you? (Sue laughed) You will want to hold on to your condition, your explanations, your correlations. You look joyful at this moment. (Sue was laughing and looked bright.)

Sue: My chest feels more joyful but from here to here I feel heavy (pointed to above eyes to top of head), mostly in my forehead.

Bob: Give that up and all you'll have left is your heart. — I'd like something from you. What kind of guarantee did they give you? How long is this by-pass, this valve in your heart, supposed to last?

Sue: A lifetime guarantee, they said I'd probably outlast most other people. He said I would never be a ballerina, but I could do any form of physical exercise with moderation, that I would have a slight murmur but there was every reason to believe I would have an average life-span.

Bob: Which in your family is how long?

Sue: Well, my grandfather is 90 (laughter).

- Bob: So you're stuck for 50 + years.
- Sue: Yes — but, —
- Bob: But —
- Sue: I was thinking it all feels so fragile to me (softly).
- Bob: Say again.
- Sue: I feel so fragile.
- Bob: How might you break?
- Sue: I feel like I've been sort of opened up and then put back together, mended. I'll probably last, but I'm sort of vulnerable at that place. I might break, I'm fragile in that way.
- Bob: So your doctors have told you that you will live a normal life-span which in your family could be 90 and you have a feeling of fragileness in this part of you. At this moment do you feel fragile or vulnerable here?
- Sue: No, at this moment I don't feel particularly fragile. I think of myself as that way sort of in general.
- Bob: Do you believe that, do you believe you see yourself as sort of fragile in general?
- Sue: (Laughingly) I see my chest area as fragile. No necessarily the rest of myself.
- Bob: Your chest doesn't look very fragile to me. — I was thinking of your job where you work with 15 preschoolers and imagining what that would be like if you were fragile.
- Sue: It would be impossible, no I'm not fragile with them.
- Bob: You might experiment with leaving off your "them" and see how that sounds to you.
- Sue: I'm not fragile.
- Bob: Only when it pays I'm fragile.
- Sue: (Sue was laughing.)
- Bob: You look very delightful right now.
- Sue: It's so true sometimes it does pay to be fragile. No, I'm not fragile. I'm not fragile.
- Bob: I believe that. It's you I want to convince! The broken heart myth was one that just wasn't true. Your heart was broken by that brute who left you, and in a few weeks this fragile little thing found another brute.

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Sue: This one isn't a brute, he is totally different. He builds harpsichords. He tells me he loves me all the time, that he thinks I'm beautiful.

Bob: How does that make you feel?

Sue: I love it! He sees me as strong, not as fragile, he makes me split the wood.

Bob: With feigned incredulousness) He makes you split the wood! (Laughed) He doesn't let you get by with being a baby! He doesn't keep you at home, looking at you and keeping you fragile.

Bob: OK, I notice that our time is up. Is it OK if we stop here, Sue?

Sue: Yes.

References

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