

GESTALT PRAYER

Gestalt prayer:

I do my thing and you do your thing.
I am not in this world to live up to your expectations
And you are not in this world to live up to mine.
You are you and I am I,
And if by chance we find each other, it's beautiful.
If not, it can't be helped. (F. Perls, 1969a, p. 4)

Discussion:

Fritz Perls used this “prayer” in his demonstration workshops at Esalen in the late 1960s. It represents the aspect of Gestalt therapy that values individual autonomy, authenticity, and self-support, as well as Perls’ rejection of unexamined expectations and demands imposed upon individuals by family or society (introjections). However, it is also very much what Dublin (1976) called “Perls-ism,” a reflection of Perls’ personal style, egotism, and problems with commitment and long-term relationships (Burnham, 1992, p. 313). Unfortunately, for those with superficial knowledge of the Gestalt approach, the lack of differentiation of ‘Perls-ism’ from Gestalt therapy distorted the image of Gestalt, creating the impression that “doing one’s own thing” was its main goal, without regard for consequences or for the interdependence of all human beings. (In the historical context of Perls’ life, it can also be understood as a reaction and protection against the fascism and collectivism he experienced in Nazi Germany in the early 1930s.)

Illustrative Quotations:

• **Fritz Perls:** “Often...the socially required self-control can only be achieved at the cost of devitalizing and of impairing the functions of large parts of the human personality – at the cost of creating collective and individual neuroses.” (1947/1992), p. 64)

• **Perls, Hefferline & Goodman:** “...in the organism before it can be called a personality at all, and in the formation of personality, the social factors are essential. ...[In] society, in the more usual sense,...we can speak of a conflict between the individual and society and call certain behavior ‘anti-social.’ In this sense, too, we must certainly call certain mores and institutions of society, ‘anti-personal.’ ” (1951, p. 333)

• **Fritz Perls:** “I believe that I do what I do for myself, for my interest in solving problems, and most of all for my own vanity. ...I feel best when I can be a prima donna and can show off my skill of getting rapidly in touch with the essence of a person and his plight. ...I am sure...that most of my showing off is overcompensation. Not only to compensate for my unsureness, but to overcompensate, to hypnotize you into the belief that I am extra special. And don’t you doubt it!” (1969b, p. 2)

• **Fagen:** Perls’ “PREACHINGS: Listen to yourself, the stirrings, the movements inside; not...other people’s words, your parents’ words, cold, critical, directing words. Be aware of you, where you are, what you’re doing; not the shoulds, commands, expectations. Keep your own eyes and ears, don’t give them away and blind and deafen yourself. Don’t give yourself away. Acknowledge what is yours. Hear the important messages inside you. Do you really need others’ approval? See - without it, you still breathe, you still move. ...leave the games, the roles as empty skins behind. Step out in nakedness, freedom. ...Find your support. Support yourself. Reach out. Dare. Risk. Discover. Enjoy. ...Be here. Be now. Be you.” (1971/1992, p. 331)

• **Kempler**: “[Fritz’s] genius rested in his ability to maintain his separateness, ...and in the skillfulness with which he helped others to gain their needed separateness. But when it came to union... - he either opposed it or was helpless. As a result, the Gestalt movement is...out of balance, with too much emphasis on ‘I am I’ and not nearly enough appreciation for the equally necessary and difficult struggle for union. ...Neither separateness nor union is the goal of the therapeutic process, but rather the exhortation of the endless and often painful undulation between them.” (Kempler, 1973/1974, p. 14; also in Smith, E.W.L., 1976, pp. 315-16)

• **Laura Perls**: “Laura Perls finds herself ‘rather unhappy about it [the Gestalt Prayer]. Particularly the last sentence, for it abdicates all responsibility to work on anything.’ ” (in Shepard, 1976, p. 4)

“He had this ideal of being independent and self-sufficient. But it’s adolescent to say, as he did in the Gestalt prayer, ‘I am doing my own thing’ or ‘I am my own person,’ because the adolescent comes home, drops his dirty clothes, changes into clean ones and goes out, and takes for granted that Mother takes care of everything. Talking about taking total responsibility for one’s life is arrogance: one’s life is always interdependent with the lives of other people and to ignore that means to ignore contact. I think Fritz ignored that to a great extent.” (in Gaines, 1979, p. 12)

• **Burnham**: “The unfortunate emphasis on Perls’ later work is best exemplified by the popularity of the ‘Gestalt Prayer.’ The prayer itself is embarrassingly simplistic and insipid. Nonetheless, its bastardization of ‘I do my thing and you do your thing’ into ‘I do my thing and to hell with you’ is a crude misinterpretation of Gestalt therapy, though it is probably a fair interpretation of some of Fritz Perls’ later work and life.”

“Perls was afraid of on-going, long-term, warm, close, soft, loving commitment. ...To avoid long-term, touching situations, he did short term workshops; he loved and left; he was hard, frustrating and cold. He refused to commit himself in a warm, soft, loving, *ongoing* manner. ...Perls was an egotist, and the disturbance of egotism has started to be erroneously established as the standard of Gestalt therapy.” (1982/1992, p. 313)

• **Crocker**: “The grain of truth in this is based on the Gestalt view of health in the human personality: ...human beings...in lively contact with their own desires and with their environment are able to move spontaneously and deliberately to fulfill themselves in the environmental field. The error comes from forgetting that every such field constrains and restrains: it sets up limitations on our ability to choose and to function within the given area of choice. Further, because ours is a shared world and because our time is limited, we rarely get just exactly what we want; and what we do get always costs us something.” (1983, p. 10)

• **Clarkson and Mackewn**: “Perls defined maturity as a continuous process of transcending environmental support and developing self-support, with an increasing reduction of dependencies. Dublin...says that there is a terrible aloneness to that definition of maturity, which he thinks is most clearly shown in the ‘Gestalt prayer.’ ” (1993, p.145)

• **Parlett**: “...the first Gestalt therapists sided with a radical anti-establishment, anarchistic-leaning minority. Only by up-turning the ‘sane’ world might real sanity break through. So while the Gestalt philosophy was early on espousing a more ecological, holistic view of human beings, it was also married to a program of self-assertion and stand-alone non-conformity. ... - how else to face state oppression, stifling hierarchies, de-energizing social conformity, and being swallowed up by a crowd?” (2001, p. 47)

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