

LIVING WITH DESIRE – AN ESSAY

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Abstract: This essay explores the concept of desire from a Gestalt perspective. Using the movie *Casablanca* as our inspiration, we look at desire from a variety of vantage points. After first discussing the development of desire, it is placed in a cultural framework. Finally, it is viewed through two Gestalt lenses – the Gestalt therapy of the 1960s and 70s and of today. We have attempted to use examples of people who have struggled, particularly with unfulfilled, conflicted or altered desires, to arrive at satisfying resolutions and assimilation.

Key words: Desire, yearning, complex wants, Gestalt therapy, *Casablanca*

Introduction

The basic reaction of all animals to being stimulated is attraction or repulsion – to move toward or away. Desire is the name we give to the attraction part of this polarity; aversion to the other side.

Desire is more formally defined as ‘to wish or long for; crave; want,’ or ‘a strong feeling, worthy or unworthy, that impels to the attainment or possession of something that is (in reality or imagination) within reach; a desire for success.’ (Random House Dictionary, 1987)².

Desire is almost always present and is as much a part of our humanness as are our hearts, our bodies and our minds. Not only do our yearnings³ provide the fuel for achievement and happiness, but also pave the road to despair, disappointment and pain.

According to a purely process perspective, to conceive of desiring as a static thing is an illusion and incorrect⁴. One does not ‘have a desire’ as one has hands and feet. Desiring is an activity. It is something that one does like touching or walking. As a result, it is constantly changing.

Yet, this is not how we usually think of desire. We think of it not as fluid or moving, but as having a form or substance. We typically view it either as a ‘thing’ such as compulsion, yearning, or craving, or as a form of energy potential. This view finds theoretical support in Gestalt therapy’s phenomenological roots⁵.

Each of these perspectives is, of course, correct, and

each more accurately fits our data some of the time. Therefore, ‘correctness’ is a function of context and perspective.

In this paper we will neither be focusing on the more biologically-based drives or needs, nor on the content or objects of desire. Neither will we be referring to the times when our needs and wants – to be loved, soothed, attended to, nurtured, protected, appreciated and recognised, to name a few – flow gracefully in and out of our awareness. Instead, we will be discussing the times when these longings create trouble; when they become so large, complex, repetitive, or compelling, that we become stuck, fixated and unable to move forward.

Ilsa and Rick: A Story of Desire

Against the backdrop of WWII the movie *Casablanca* tells the story of an American expatriate with a mysterious past named Richard Blaine. While in Paris, he meets and falls in love with Ilsa Lund. He is abandoned by her when she fails to show up at the train station where they had agreed to meet and go off together. Instead he receives a letter from her telling him that although she still loves him, she can neither go with him nor see him again. Both his heart and spirit are broken.

Unable to come to terms with this rejection, he abandons his once lofty ideals. He buys a nightclub in Casablanca, names it Rick’s Café Américaine, and turns his back on his country and patriotic values, becoming a

disillusioned cynic. Rick's wasteland of a life only begins to change when Ilsa suddenly appears and professes her undying love for him. There is a hitch however; Ilsa is married to Victor Laszlo, a leader in the underground, and they are both stranded in Casablanca.

The movie is filled with suspenseful twists and turns. However, none is more surprising than the final scene at the airport. Ilsa has agreed to leave her husband and go away with Rick. All that is left is to tell Victor of their plans and give him the letters of transit so that he can leave the country and renew his effort to battle the Nazis.

In a dramatic turnaround, Rick tells a stunned Ilsa that she must go with her husband. He tells her that if they were to run off together, she would regret it, '... maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon, and for the rest of your life.' 'But what about us?' Ilsa asks. 'We'll always have Paris,' answers Rick. 'Here's looking at you, kid.'

How did Rick come to make this choice? Had he become selfless, or experienced a shift in values? Had he come to realise that he could never recapture the past or reproduce a moment? Had he somehow come to understand that clinging to what can't be without knowledge or awareness of the reality of circumstances can be a source of pain and suffering? How had Rick been able to analyse and assimilate new information and experience in a way that allowed him to live with a painful reality and move on in a healthy and productive way?

In order to answer these questions, it is important to track both Rick's and Ilsa's experience with desire.

When Rick and Ilsa first meet and fall in love in Paris, they share a powerful and romantic attraction toward one another, heightened by the chaos and threat of the world in which they live – the Europe of World War II. In the midst of rampant evil and destruction, their love flourishes and envelops them in mutual rapture. Often, when one experiences such a shared life-affirming relationship, one thinks, 'I can do anything. I can fight anything.' One can only imagine that Rick's desire to defeat evil, (as demonstrated by his having run guns to Ethiopia and having fought on the Loyalist side in the Spanish Civil War), is bolstered by Ilsa's love for him. Rick experiences no conflict and little complexity regarding his yearnings. In truth, he and Ilsa are 'in this together'.

It is, therefore, understandable why Rick is so devastated when he receives Ilsa's letter at the train station. He has no psychological ground for this abandonment and so is taken completely by surprise, (Melnick and Nevis, 1986). There were no clues, no hints, no suggestions that something was shifting in their relationship and so Rick is left with the task of making sense out of something that seems inherently senseless. Without more information he is left to his projections,

stranded in an emotional crisis that changes the course of his life and his very character.

Rick eventually ends up in Casablanca, an expatriate nightclub owner with an amoral bent. Although he once had political leanings, he is now 'apathetic and apolitical.' (Lebo, 1992, p.162). Emotionally Rick is stuck with his unfulfilled desire for Ilsa and distanced from those around him. 'Rick is a character so hardened by fate that he hides his true feelings from even his closest friends...' (Lebo, *ibid* pp. 162–63). He seemingly has lost his way and compromised his values. Although he does nothing to help the Nazi side, he also does little to support the Allies. He works hard to present himself as uncaring, uninvolved, uninterested and above the fray.

There is no indication that a self-learning, maturational process is underway within him. His desire does not take on an evolved shape and form that allows him to continue to live his life with integrity and meaning. When he lost Ilsa, he kept his initial desire, but lost an essential part of himself.

At one time, in Paris, Rick's personal and political desires could co-exist and nurture each other. However, once Ilsa left him, it seems that *all desire* receded, other than to be alone and unknown. The power of his desire and love for her was so great that her absence affected all facets of his life and his work. Simply put, Rick becomes someone else. He is wounded so profoundly that he becomes not only disillusioned but hard and amoral in his effort to survive emotionally.

When Ilsa finally appears in Rick's cafe, she asks Sam, the piano player, to play Rick's and her song. Sam reluctantly does so. At this moment, Rick enters and before seeing Ilsa, angrily admonishes Sam, since he had ordered him never to play that song.

We now realise that Rick has strived to create an environment devoid of reminders of Ilsa so that his desire, along with his sadness, hurt, and confusion, can remain manageable and below the surface. His yearning has not been creatively adjusted, assimilated, extinguished, or erased from conscious memory. It floats very near the surface as evidenced by his reaction to the song. We understand that within his hurt and anger, Rick's desire remains intact and complicated by the fact that he does not really know or understand why Ilsa left him. In part because of this misunderstanding, Rick remains emotionally immobilised, devoting his energies to containing his desire, his anger, and his pain. One might argue that he is unable to mourn, resulting in an inability to move on.

Later he asks Sam to play the song for him saying if she can stand it so can he. At this point, despite the concomitant feelings of hurt and loss, Rick moves toward his desire and momentarily loosens the reins on himself. As Harlan Lebo says in *Casablanca: Behind the Scenes*,

‘But when he has the opportunity to rekindle his lost love even for a moment, he risks his life for the opportunity.’ (1992, p. 163).

As the story progresses, we learn that Ilsa left Rick because she discovered that her husband, whom she believed had died in the war effort, was alive and needed her. Unable to tell Rick the truth, she made her decision independently, choosing permanent separation from Rick as the resolution of her conflict – to be with the man she loves or to help the heroic husband she admires. In her note to him at the train station she writes, ‘I cannot go with you or ever see you again. You must not ask why. Just believe that I love you. Go my darling, and God bless you.’

In a process parallel to Rick’s, Ilsa too has never extinguished her desire. She has continued to love Rick, yet successfully lives with that yearning through her commitment to her husband and his lofty ideals and to her commitment never to see Rick again. Once in his presence, however, she cannot deny her love and desire. Her resolve is shattered and she finds herself incapable of leaving him again.

Ultimately, Rick learns the truth about why he was abandoned and learns too that Ilsa never stopped loving him. Their mutual desire has in fact remained intact. With this realisation Rick is able now to take part in the decision making that will have tremendous impact on his life and hers. At Ilsa’s request, Rick agrees to make the decisions for both of them.

Reunited emotionally, with each sure of the other’s love and desire, Rick’s yearning to fight evil re-emerges. As Ilsa did in Paris, Rick now faces the complexity of conflicting desires – to be with Ilsa or to do what is best for the Allied war effort. In this case, as with Ilsa, the yearnings are not compatible. So he chooses the higher moral value (or at least as so determined by the time and circumstance) to send Ilsa away with her husband who needs her support and love to keep up the good fight. Rick tells her, ‘Inside of us we both know you belong with Victor. You’re part of his work. The thing that keeps him going. If that plane leaves the ground and you’re not with him, you’ll regret it.’ (Lebo, p. 157).

The decision that Ilsa made in Paris is now being replicated by Rick himself. With full knowledge of Ilsa’s life before Paris and her husband’s mission, Rick can now address his desires, their objects and conflicts, in a mature and evolved way. Although Ilsa regretfully leaves him, we know that he believes ‘...that the problems of three little people don’t amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world.’ Rick has experienced a kind of rebirth which reconnects him to the cultural events of his time. No longer indifferent, no longer stuck in the pain of longing, he can choose a life with meaning.

Rick can now pursue his role in the Resistance and live

with his unfulfilled love in a way that is not only managed, but assimilated as a cherished loss, not an infuriating torment that distorts his character and destroys his life.

Although at this point in the story, we lose sight of Ilsa, we can only hope that she too will be able to live with her unfulfilled yearning knowing that she and Rick share this mutual sacrifice. In this way, they are united on a higher plane that prevents a regret that would be ‘soon and for the rest of their lives’ if they chose to be together.

In the tale of Rick and Ilsa, we see desire in many forms and manifestations. They include mutually-shared longing, abandonment, unrequited love, and patriotism. We also see the power and impact of truth, knowledge and cultural environment on desire and choices. As characters struggle with conflicting longings, they attempt resolutions that are both damaging and productive.

What stands out is that life is complex and that our desires and yearnings exist at many levels, with many different objects and goals. Often, despite the legitimacy of each one, they may, unfortunately, not be compatible. And so, choices must be made with awareness, adaptability, and finally acceptance and assimilation. At some point in our lives, although we may not be challenged to make the heart-wrenching choices that Rick and Ilsa did, we must all learn how to live with regret. We must work not to get stuck in anger, resentment, and despair when we can’t get what we desire.

The Development of Desire The Journey from Simple to Complex Wants

Infants have only a primitive form of needing. For them, complex wants and desires hardly exist. They are primarily governed by their impulses. We talk of their world being filled with needs of a simple kind: nurturance, stimulation, love, soothing, contact, comfort, and support. And although even newborns demonstrate an ability for preferences, they don’t, to a large degree, experience a separateness from their environment. Choice making abilities are at a primitive level. In a real sense they ARE their needs and wants.

As infants grow into children, they gradually begin to experience their separateness. It is this increasing ability to differentiate that is necessary for normal childhood development. It is also required for the emergence of desires.

The world becomes divided into me, you, it; the self and the environment. We come to think of the desired object or person as existing outside of the self or psyche. We experience a split between the desirer, (self), and the object(s) of desire. This split is even true for the less concrete and more complex longings, such as happiness or peace on earth.

As children mature, not only do they begin developing appetites for specific things in the world, they become more adept at speaking their needs and getting them met. The external environment, as we are well aware, also has much influence regarding the formation and expression of yearnings and longings. At times the external world seems able to take over the child's psyche totally. This is patently (and sometimes painfully) obvious to anyone who has taken a young child through a toy store.

Our engagements with the world around us become more complicated as we mature. The child, in turn, develops more complex organisations to deal with an ever more demanding environment (Mullen, 1990).

By adolescence, immediate and concrete wants and needs have expanded to include more abstract, less tangible ones. Although teenagers' immediate needs still predominate, their experience of desire becomes more complex. 'I want to be a dancer, to travel around the world, to make a difference to others, to be successful'. Also, adolescence brings with it sexuality and the emergence of one of our greatest cravings – lust – the so-called 'aches of the heart'.

The management of desires is difficult at any age, but never more troublesome than during adolescence, a time of paradox. On the one hand, the individual is propelled out into the world as never before. Internal tensions increase, become more varied and complex, and are directed externally, often with great aggression.

On the other hand, teenagers lack experience and practical resources. Their ability to get big wants met is poor, while their skills at containment, turning away, and transformation are underdeveloped. This turns adolescence into a time of danger, in which bad decision-making and poor impulse control are common.

As we get older, life takes on a more complex form, and our relationship to our wants and desires shifts. The primary dilemma created by our desires is that for most of us, our appetites are too big, given what's possible. The objects of our desires, even when positive, are often too scarce, elusive or illusory to bring us satisfaction. The result is that we often don't get those things for which we yearn.

And what of fulfillment? What about those times when we really do 'win'? Do the individuals who tend to get their desires met more often end up leading a happier and more rewarding life? Is it really true that 'you can never be too thin or too rich'? We soon learn that having the ability to get what one wants is rarely what one imagines. We learn that there is a price we have to pay to chase our dreams. We also learn that even when we pay the price and succeed, the results seldom match our expectations. Most importantly, we learn that desires rarely exist in isolation. They usually coexist with other, often contradictory, longings forming a complex pattern.

Mary Ann: Memories of Yearning – The Evolution of a Simple Desire

Mary Ann grew up on the streets of New York in the 1940s. It was a time when everyone seemed to be poor, and doing without did not generate shame; it just was the way things were. The fact that she had little money bothered her only at certain specific times, which occurred, unfortunately, nearly every day. You see, each day, on her way home from school, she would pass a store filled with fancy candies – candies which Mary Ann could not afford to buy. She used to spend what seemed like hours looking at them through the store window. It was as if she were hypnotised by her yearning. 'When I am an adult' she promised herself, 'I'll buy as many as I want.'

Now that Mary Ann is grown and able to eat as much candy as she wishes, she rarely does. As a matter of fact, when she does purchase fancy candies, she usually gives them away to friends, rarely eating more than an occasional one.

She likes to tell friends her childhood story of the candy store. It's as if, in the telling, she is able to reconnect to the old yearning. During these occasions one can see the sadness in her eyes. If one looks a little closer one can also see the traces of her youthful appetite – the raw passion and energy which helped create a meaningful life. At these times Mary Ann is filled with both relief and regret. She knows that she will never re-experience the bitter-sweet preciousness of those moments in front of the candy store filled with childhood cravings.

What has become of her desire for candy? We guessed that Rick in *Casablanca* might have transformed his love for Ilsa into a higher ideal. Had Mary Ann done the same, converting her desire for candy into a gift to others? Or maybe she realised that if she indulged in chocolates she would regret it, either for the very adult reasons of weight and health, or because she might not be able to recapture the excitement and delight of a young child. Does she avoid disappointment by retreating into a type of timidity, lacking the courage to go fully after her wishes; to risk tasting and eating with the single-minded energy of a child? Or did the shift to easy accessibility alter, and even eliminate, her desire, which may have been in part predicated on the actual unattainability of the candy?

In attempting to understand and explain Mary Ann's behaviour, a series of difficult questions emerge. Why is it so hard to explain relatively simple yearnings as, for example, specific foods? Why do some people crave chocolate and others potato chips, while others appear to have no cravings at all?

How and why do some desires become deeply grooved

– seemingly impervious to influence – while other longings seem to ebb and flow? And what of long-term change? How can something that was the major focus of one's life become transformed into an object of little or no interest?

John: Pursuing a Dream – The Evolution of Conflicting Desires

John finally won the position he had yearned for and dreamed of since his college days. He was promoted to the presidency of a large agency whose mission matched his idealism: to disperse food to the poor. He was fulfilling his desire; he would lead and create in a concrete way – a way that would make a difference.

Although an idealist, he was not naive. Just before starting his new job, he listed five ethical values – beliefs which he felt compelled never to breach. He promised himself that if he broke one of these rules he would quit the next day.

His agency flourished, and he felt wonderful being able effectively to create a better world. Understandably, people were startled when he suddenly quit after five years of excellent leadership.

Not so predictably, John's termination also surprised him. It seems that he woke up one morning knowing that he 'simply had had enough'. He seemed unable to explain why he had stayed on as long as he had, since he had violated not one, but three of his five bottom lines during his successful tenure with his agency. As he tried to make sense both of his quitting and not quitting, he kept saying to himself, 'Life isn't so simple.'

What had happened to John's desire to adhere to his five tenets? And how had he begun to violate his moral construct without awareness? What had changed – his values or his desire? Both or neither? Had his wish to be an ethical executive come in conflict with his desire to be an effective executive? Were the two incompatible in this work arena, or did an unconscious tug of war take place that slowly shifted John's focus toward the achievement of agency goals and away from personal ethics?

In our contemporary society which continually stresses achievement and material success, we all may face John's dilemma. We all may find our desires influenced by external pressures and values and discover we are drifting in ways that may surprise us.

John learned what many of us do, that our lives are often filled with contradictory desires that do not coexist in equilibrium, but vie for priority and dominance. His need to follow a set of moral guidelines conflicted with his need to produce money for the poor. His sense of morality won out – but at a great potential cost to others. At the end, he was shaken and less clear than when he had begun.

A Cultural Framework

We are all products of a society which values certain ways of defining, judging, and labelling deep-seated yearnings. In our modern Western⁶ culture a high value is placed on objects of desire – not on desiring as an ongoing process. We make the mistake of putting the emphasis on the figure, while largely ignoring the ground.

We learn to project our desires onto the world and then go after them. If we don't achieve satisfaction and success, we are to try harder. We are taught that satisfaction comes from winning, (i.e., getting our desires met).

Not only are we taught to treat our desires as things, but also to label them. We Westerners learn to use negative words such as addiction or obsession for cravings which cause obvious pain to ourselves and others. We appropriately view these behaviours negatively. However, these labels sometimes become generalised to the individual. This often results in the person being seen in a narrow and rigid way and thus identified as alcoholic, workaholic, co-dependent, or food or sex addicted. The person becomes a simplified caricature, devoid of other behaviours and characteristics.

Many of our cultural systems of healing respond to this problem not by questioning the process of labelling, but by neutralising each label; what therapists call re-framing. Thus, for systems like Alcoholics Anonymous and certain religions, naming oneself an alcoholic or sinner is not a condemnation, but a statement of fact, and an important first step in recovery or redemption.

Re-framing is just the beginning, however. The individual is taught to abstain or turn away from these troublesome, oversized appetites, learning to adhere to a prescribed set of introjected rules and to utilise community support. Examples include the twelve steps of AA and the Ten Commandments.

Our Western culture teaches us what, in the end, can only be described as a simple two step dance. We learn either to move toward or away from desire. This approach, however, takes us just so far. For viewing desire from an attainment or non-attainment perspective keeps us attached in a fixed and narrow way to our yearning. What we are not taught in our culture is to become interested in desiring as a process which has a dynamic life and the potential to change and evolve, not just to 'get us something'. How we live with, learn from and manage our desires is as, or more, important than succeeding or failing, attaining or not attaining our desires.

Unfortunately, the Gestalt therapy of the 1960s and 70s reinforced the narrower view and emphasised the attainment of personal, and often self-absorbed wants and goals.

Gestalt Therapy of the 60s and 70s

During the 1960s and 70s, Western society was going through a profound change. We were quickly moving from a repressive to an expressive society. A generation of young adults was in full rebellion against their parents' values. They were anti-war and endorsed idealism, creative sexual expression, freedom, and inner exploration. The value placed on experimentation was reflected in its communes, music, and drug use; as well as the endorsement of psychotherapy as a fundamental vehicle for growth and change.

Gestalt therapy first gained popularity and acceptance during these turbulent times. This is because the Gestalt approach mirrored and, in a small way, helped shape the prevalent values and beliefs. It was in tune with the cultural values of self support, the stretching of boundaries (including drug use), and sexual experimentation.

Clearly this form of Gestalt therapy was synonymous with Fritz Perls. He viewed aggression as a positive force, and stressed action, often without any long-term respect for the other. Self support and the gratification of short term wants were emphasised. Focusing on sensations and feelings, he valued satisfying bodily needs and living in the present (Stoehr, 1993).

The Gestalt approach of the 1960s was billed as a short term therapy for the masses. Change could be seen taking place in the moment. By first identifying and, more importantly, by then acting on a need in the present, one could reduce tension (diminish desire) and achieve closure (fulfillment). It fits the Western ideal that if one is courageous, well prepared, and energetic, one can get one's needs met.

Scientific support for the model was drawn from Gestalt psychology's theory of perception. This theory was designed to address how people organise simple experience. A series of 'laws' were formulated which in turn were generalised as explanatory principles for more complex behaviours (Fuhr, 1993). The original analogy turned paradigm looks something like this:

We start with an awareness of a need or hunger (such as for food, sex, good grades, or a vacation). If we mobilise our energy and act, (scream out our needs, search for a sexual partner, study, save our money, work hard), get our need met, (fill our stomachs, make love, get an A, soak up the sun), we will have achieved satisfaction and closure. The fulfilled need will then recede into the background, being replaced by others. And so we move on, hip-hopping from need to need.

As we look back, the mistake was putting the emphasis on the narrow figure for the achievement of good psychological health. We have now come to realise that long-term change requires much more. It requires the development and utilisation of a rich ground.

Although by the 1960s Gestalt therapy had developed a deep and fertile base, the popularised version reflected only certain aspects of the rich and complex theory. This was not because of any inherent value, but because of cultural fit. As a result, many of the theoretical underpinnings of the Gestalt approach were ignored, or at least understated, during this time.

Complex Wants

The 1960s Gestalt model seldom fits for our complicated wants and yearnings. Complex needs are not easy to figure out, act on or resolve. Just when we think we've met them, discarded them, confronted them, and resolved them, they seem to appear again, sometimes in a superficially different, yet suspiciously familiar form. In psychotherapy patients often act out some of these complex yearnings in the transference.

How does one lead a fulfilling life, if the fulfillment of complicated desires seldom occurs? Furthermore, how does one 'complete' and move on, if completion is oversimplification at best, and myth at worst? The answer is not to be found in the Gestalt theory of tension reduction and perception which were emphasised during this time.

Luckily, however, the Gestalt approach has always been much more than that practised in the 60s and 70s. It has been nurtured by a number of sources. In addition to Perls, it draws heavily from the work of Goodman, Lewin, and Buber⁷. The result is a Gestalt therapy which more resembles an Eastern approach to conceptualizing and addressing desire.

Both a process and phenomenological perspective is emphasised. We learn to become aware, to become interested in the process of desiring – not in achieving or avoiding. Thus we strive for insight as to the structure of these existential situations.

As discussed earlier, this perspective does not instruct us to move toward or away from our yearnings. Instead, it teaches us to both view and interact with our desires in a different way.

Jane: Desire Transformed

Jane, a well-educated 63-year-old woman, has been married to her second husband for nearly 15 years. The marriage has been a big disappointment in the sexual arena. Bill is rarely interested in making love. Jane has tried individual and couples therapy, meditation, the expression of her rage and anguish to Bill and others, and even has made a short-lived attempt at chastity. Unfortunately, none of these interventions has worked.

The one thing she did not attempt was to have an affair. She knew that this 'solution' to problems had contributed

to the breakup of her first marriage. She also has never seriously considered divorce. Her reasons are clear. They include her stage of life (she is 64), her loyalty to people (she laughingly refers to this trait as her 'curse'), and her basic love for Bill.

While the familiar ache has continued over many years and the painful scenario keeps re-occurring in much the same form, Jane has been learning to focus on herself. She knows more about both her neediness and autonomy and has been able to express both more fully to her friends. She is now struggling to be more expressive to Bill when her needs arise, just as they are, without blaming or demanding.

Jane is attempting to meet her needs for being nurtured and cared for in other areas besides the sexual arena. She is learning to turn more to friends.

Who knows just what path her seeking will take? She does understand, however, that this particular seeking and learning is growing out of her lack of fulfillment. Although this may seem negative or unfortunate, what is important is that Jane has not become stuck on the initial form of her desire.

As Rick comes to accept that he cannot be with Ilsa, Jane has allowed herself to consider and accept that she and Bill will never have the sexual relationship for which she has yearned during the past fifteen years. Before arriving at this stage of acceptance, she has, (she can remind herself), tried all strategies consistent with her moral framework and experience and has sought support in developing other objects for her energy and her needs. In addition, she has learned to live with regret and disappointment in a way that neither weighs her down psychologically nor poisons her otherwise good, solid, and fulfilling marriage. She accepts that 'you can't always get what you want' and moves on.

Does she still feel sexually deprived? The answer is a resounding yes. Would her life have been better if she had found sexual fulfillment with Bill? She used to ask this question often. More recently, it has lost its relevance to her life.

One might say that her longing has become part of who she is; what Gestaltists call the ground, and the poet Rilke refers to as 'blood and bones'. It is not all she is, nor is it the focal point of her daily awareness. It is an assimilated, accepted and, in part, transformed drive which remains as a poignant thread in the fabric of her existence.

Through her struggle, Jane has *lived* the paradoxical theory of change which instructs us to enter our desires, (Beisser, 1970). It includes the acknowledgment that, to a large extent, we are our yearnings; we are our experience. Desires are not foreign bodies which are separate from, and exert control over us. We carry these yearnings deep in our bodies and close to the surface of our awareness, and they help shape our lives daily, sometimes moment to

moment. We learn that rather than avoiding or fulfilling them, we must learn to embrace them. We, like Jane, must learn to carry them well, i.e., without attachment.

Jim: Desire Extinguished

Jim learned two lessons early in life. Being obsessive was not good, and 'he was one.' Jim hated his picayune attention to detail and his inability to turn away from incompleteness. He yearned to be spontaneous and risk-taking.

As an adolescent he found himself constantly immersed in worry about all sorts of things. He always managed to find flaws in any idea or plan. Fun seemed to be for others – he had too much worrying to do.

It surprised few that Jim became a lawyer. After graduation from law school, he married a woman who also hated his obsessiveness. 'Your caution and negativity make me crazy!' 'Why is the glass always half empty?', she would exclaim angrily.

While in therapy his script of 'my obsessiveness is bad' began to shift. He learned that it not only brought him pain but also rewards. He began to realise that his obsessiveness contributed to his success as a lawyer. Furthermore, he began to appreciate how his style helped balance his wife's impulsiveness, helping to keep them out of financial trouble. Consequently, his desire to be something he, by nature, was not, began to diminish.

Jim's script of 'my obsessiveness is bad' slowly became transformed into 'I have an obsessive style of engaging in the world. Like all styles, it has an up and down side'. He began to notice the interplay and connectedness of opposites, (what Gestalt therapists refer to as polarities), which helped him to be aware of the down side of spontaneity and the upside of obsessiveness. This then enabled him to let go of his desire for spontaneity and become friends with his obsessiveness.

Unlike Jane, he has not yet created a support system of individuals who validate him for who he is and not only accept, but appreciate, the benefits of his obsessive nature. Without that, he may be at risk of resurrecting his self-loathing and of reanointing spontaneity as his behavioural and temperamental ideal. It is hoped that as he pursues therapy as well as friends and colleagues who support his natural style, his lifelong desire for a characterological transformation will recede.

Instead of striving to become someone that he is not, Jim can derive satisfaction from the upside of his style, while working on modest changes that push his boundaries and enrich his experience of himself. He can move toward being a little less worried and a little more spontaneous, while remaining satisfied with his essential character and style.

Endings

Desire in its most simple form consists of habitual patterns of sensations, affect, and cognition. It is our biological imperative to organise experience, to create figures. Said simply, we have to want; we have to desire.

The Gestalt approach postulates that it is our wants which organise experience and provide the increased energy necessary to act. The achievement of the want or the failure to achieve the want – *either one*, properly assimilated – enables us to move on. With assimilation achieved, the ground becomes enriched – we become wiser. The result, hopefully, is an increased sense of uniqueness, and a complex and maturing sense of self and others.

George: *Desire and Regret*

George, as many of us do, looked up his first love at the high school reunion. It had been 25 years. At first, they were strangers. After a while they began bantering like they had done 25 before. It was confusing. He found himself loving – but not this woman. She was different – yet in some ways still the same. She, too, felt the same confusing sensations, not for the man standing before her, because the one she had loved no longer existed. This one was 25 years older and yet his essence was still the same.

They both reminisced and for a brief time fell back into their sweet adolescence. It was fun and, at times, poignant. This flirtation with the past is what reunions are often about.

As the night progressed, something strange began to happen. The war stories faded and instead of losing interest in each other as typically happens on these occasions, they began to relate in the present.

He found that her adolescent narcissism had been extinguished by two tough marriages and the hard work of caring for a chronically-ill child. His smug arrogance born of inadequacy had faded, helped along by years of therapy and due largely to a life filled with many bumps and bruises. As the night ended he looked at her and said, 'Something strange is happening. I think I'm falling in love with you.' She smiled a knowing look and said, 'It's not so strange.' He went to stay with a friend. She returned to her family.

The next day as he was getting ready to leave, she called and asked to take him to the airport. As they approached the airfield, she asked him to stay and spend the night. He laughed as he thought of the strange sexual flip flops that occur in middle age. She wanted a one night stand: he could settle for no less than a developed relationship – and he wasn't even sure about that. 'I need to think. My answer is no, for now,' he said. 'I'll call you in a week.'

It was a restless seven days. The yearning and the longing were filled with both sweetness and pain. His mood state had a form, a shape, an aesthetic. Any action would change it. It wasn't a question of moving toward or away, of disappointment or fulfillment. He was struck with the awareness that any movement toward her or away from her, positive or negative, would result in a loss. Call it what you will – yearning, desire, or longing – that old feeling felt in many ways like a long-lost dear friend.

Even more powerful than the understanding that any movement would result in loss was the realization that if he did nothing, time would also effect a change. He laughed at himself, a laugh filled with irony and lightness. There simply was no way out of this mess.

He called her as he had promised. He didn't know what he was going to say except that he knew that by being with her something precious would be lost. He told her of his terrible longing for her and that he'd rather take his chances alone. He told her that in the 25 years he had learned some things, that his desire for her caused him tremendous pain, but at the same time didn't feel half bad. What was that word that described his sensations? 'Bittersweet' he remembered.

If this were a movie and not real life, George might have borrowed the thoughts of Bogey and said, 'If we come together we'll regret it ... maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon and for the rest of our lives.' But he would also have added, 'If we do not come together, we'll regret it, maybe not tomorrow, but soon, and for the rest of our lives.' Furthermore, either decision – to move forward or away would generate joy as well as sorrow. To paraphrase George, 'There simply is no way out of this mess!'

'Here's looking at you kid.'

Notes

- 1 We would like to thank the members of the New England Eating and Writing Group for their helpful comments.
- 2 Desire can be differentiated from words with similar meanings. 'Craving implies a deep and imperative wish for something, based on a sense of need and hunger: a craving for food, companionship. A longing is an intense wish, generally repeated or enduring, for something that is at the moment beyond reach but may be attainable at some future time; a longing to visit Europe. Yearning suggests persistent, uneasy, and sometimes wistful or tender longing; a yearning for one's native land.' (*Random House Dictionary*, 1987, p. 539).
We can order these words in many ways, such as the degree to which the tension is biological (hunger, thirst, sex, release of bodily tensions) versus psychological

(acceptance, self-worth, uniqueness). Other dimensions might include the importance of the tension for physical survival, or its level of complexity. For example, we usually think of instincts or needs as being physiologically driven, necessary for physical well being and of a relatively simple nature. Desires and yearnings, on the other hand, have a more complex form. They are also more the result of learning as the individual engages the external environment.

- 3 In this paper, we will be using words such as desire, yearning and longing interchangeably to refer to the more complex, psychologically-based tensions.
- 4 However, because of the linguistic difficulties in using process language, we will, in general, stick to the noun form throughout the paper.
- 5 Gestalt therapy's phenomenological roots are well-documented. The interested reader is referred to Yontef (1979) and Zinker (1977).
- 6 By Western, we mean, primarily, American. Any insult to our non-American colleagues is unintended.
- 7 Our purpose is not to articulate the specific and valuable contributions of these thinkers to the Gestalt approach. The reader interested in Lewin is invited to read Parlett (1991, 1993) and Wheeler (1991); for Goodman we recommend his many writings (1991) as well as Stoehr, (1993); and for Buber, we recommend Beaumont (1993) Friedman (1990), and Hycner, (1985, 1990).

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