

GESTALT THERAPY

The Art of Contact



Serge Ginger



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- **Les interventions éducatives** (in Persian). Éditions universitaires, Téhéran, 1976. 160 p.
- **Nouvelles lettres persanes: Journal d'un Français à Téhéran (1974–1980)** Anthropos, Paris, 1981. 255 p. (Grand prix international du reportage)
- **La Gestalt-thérapie et quelques autres approches humanistes, dans la pratique hospitalière**, in *Former à l'Hôpital* (editor: HONORÉ B.). Privat, Toulouse, 1983.
- **La Gestalt, une troisième voie? Développement personnel et sexualité** in *Le Développement personnel et les Travailleurs sociaux* (editors: VANOYE et GINGER), ESF, Paris, 1985.
- **La Gestalt, une thérapie du contact** (translated into 6 languages). (with Anne GINGER), Hommes et Gr, Paris, 1987 (7^e ed: 2003). 550 p.
- **La Gestalt: l'art du contact** (translated into 11 languages). Paris, 1995. Guide de poche Marabout n° 3554. (19th ed.: 2007). 290 p.
- **Lexique international de Gestalt-thérapie** (in eight languages) FORGE, Paris, 1995. 176 p.
- **Foreword of Manuel de Gestalt-thérapie** de Fritz PERLS, ESF, Paris, 2003, 128 p.; 2nd edition: 2005.
- **La Gestalt-thérapie aujourd'hui**, in *A quel psy se vouer?*, editor: ELKAÏM M., Le Seuil, Paris, 2003.
- **Foreword of Pourquoi la Psychothérapie? Fondements, méthodes, applications**, editor: NGUYEN T., Dunod, Paris, 2005.
- **Foreword of La Gestalt-thérapie, un processus créatif**, ZINKER J., Dunod, Paris, 2006.
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- **Être psychothérapeute**, editors: GINGER S., MARC E., TARPINIAN A., Dunod, Paris, 2006, 270 p.
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Serge Ginger

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Serge Ginger has been one of the pioneers of Gestalt Therapy in France, since 1970. With his wife, Anne Ginger, he founded the *Paris School of Gestalt (École Parisienne de Gestalt, EPG)*, in 1980- which is actually one of the leading Gestalt Training institutes in Europe.

He is a clinical Psychologist, Psychoanalyst, Psychodramatist and Gestalt Therapist and teaches Gestalt in France and throughout the world (France, Belgium, Switzerland, Italy, Russia, Romania, Poland, Latvia, Brazil, Mexico, Norway, USA, and Japan).

He is currently the President of the *International Federation of Gestalt Training Organizations (FORGE)*, Secretary General of the *French National Umbrella for Psychotherapy (Fédération Française de Psychothérapie et Psychanalyse, FF2P)* and the Registrar of the *European Association for Psychotherapy (EAP)*.

FOREWORD

Ken Evans

Over the next two pages I trust I will inspire you to read and enjoy this creative and original book by Serge Ginger, cofounder with his wife, Anne, of the Paris School of Gestalt (Ecole Parisienne de Gestalt) in 1980.

Some years ago, a wise woman said to me, “When you meet a Gestalt Therapist, you meet a real person.” (Marianne Fry, personal communication) A Gestalt therapist brings their authentic presence to the therapeutic meeting and they will work alongside you, without negative judgement, supporting and encouraging you to discover who you really are and who you may become.

In this book, you will encounter not only fine words, ideas and theories. More importantly, you will meet Serge Ginger – the man. He has written this book in such a way that his presence and authenticity, expressed from his heart as well as his head, light up the pages. So let me describe to you something of the qualities of the person you will meet as you continue to read this book.

I first met Serge Ginger when I was President of the European Association for Psychotherapy (EAP) in the mid-1990's. To be honest, I found him somewhat intimidating at first! Who was this articulate and intelligent French man who seemed to appear from nowhere at every committee meeting, encouraging and motivating his colleagues to greater professionalism and ethical endeavor? And where did he get his seemingly inexhaustible supply of energy, that left much younger colleagues amazed?

With the creation of the European Certificate for Psychotherapy in 1997, it was no surprise that his colleagues and peers in the EAP

entrusted him with the important task of evaluating and monitoring applications for certification across 26 (now 41) European nations. We all felt confident that this was the right person for the task. It was not simply his impressive intellect and energy, but also his ability to confront the comfortable and pompous often with a mischievous grin. Both philosophical and pragmatic, here was a man capable of promoting the credibility of the psychotherapy profession by championing fairness and justice, irrespective of reputation, position or nationality.

Through the pages of this book, *Gestalt Therapy – The Art of Contact*, you will be able to meet Serge Ginger, intelligent, articulate, energetic, supportive, challenging and provocative. If you are a member of the public interested in finding out more about Psychotherapy, then this book will prove accessible and informative. If you are a potential trainee or client, this book will prove a useful preparation, possibly even a trigger to explore further and more deeply the richness and color of the Gestalt approach.

What I believe you will also discern in this book is the quality of compassion that drives, perhaps compels, Serge Ginger to continue to write, teach and practice as a Gestalt therapist at the age of 79. Finally, through this book, Serge Ginger communicates that he is genuinely interested in you, the reader. Beyond all the exciting and revolutionary ideas contained here, what drives him is his desire that you proceed to find ways to experience a deeper meaning and purpose in life, and to defy the isolation, loneliness and anonymity that increasingly permeates the modern world.

I trust that this book will be a door to a deeper exploration of your self such that you may:

Live life fully
Love generously
and
Become all that you can be.

Ken Evans
President, European Association for Gestalt Therapy
Past President EAP
Normandy, France
April 2007

INTRODUCTION

Urgently needed: more human contact!

One of the main features of our time is the massive development of “real-time” communications: newspapers, radio, telephone, television, fax, internet, etc. have become more and more widespread. We all witness the humanitarian crisis in Kosovo, the rocket landing in Siberia, the rugby match in Australia, the terrorist attack of September 11th . . .

The whole world is right there in our living room, *whether we like it . . . or not.*

The character of *simple human contact* is denatured by such media technology: we meet each other less often by choice, contact is often by chance, and we “zap” from one thing to the another, as the fancy takes us.

Paradoxically, now that the world has invaded our homes (not just television and internet, but the mobile telephone—which interrupts any conversation without warning), we feel more isolated than ever before. *Depression*, the “illness of the century”, affects almost 40% of the population, at one moment or another. There are *millions* of people in the world taking *Prozac*!

What can be done to ward off the loneliness and anonymity that result from our “*depersonalizing*” technology? How can we develop and share *human warmth* through authentic encounters? How can we encourage creativity, the *right to be different*, and at the same time let each person lead his life as it suits them¹ and be recognized for who

they are? How can we help vulnerable people clearly see closed *sects* for what they really are, a misleading *illusion* of safety?

Gestalt Therapy, and other branches of *Humanistic Psychology*, developed in an attempt to respond to these challenges, amongst others.

The Gestalt revolution

In this book we will see that Gestalt Therapy proposes a *new, and even revolutionary way of life*. We will show why this method, originally European, underwent such successful development in the United States of America and then throughout Europe, Russia and even Japan. Gestalt is now present in the medical and social fields, and is penetrating the private sector.

Cartesian thought maintains that any phenomenon or behavior must be *understood* before it can be changed, that the *past cause* must be found (by objective analysis) before the problem can be solved. But now, developments in physics and *Postmodern Paradigm* seem to reflect Gestalt thought: truly objective observation is impossible (the act of observation *alters* the observed physical object, just as the mere presence of an observer changes the behavior of an observed subject). *Chaos theory* mocks us with uncertainty: could it be true that most “causes” are actually in our future? Everything we know has become uncertain . . . and yet perhaps we could feel it coming with our *right brain*, the intuitive side (as opposed to the left-sided rational brain), which chooses tonight’s film, or our life partner!

Why are you reading these lines, in this book? What is the “cause”? Maybe it’s the next obvious step in a logical sequence of events: it was recommended by a friend, so you bought it? Here we continue in a traditional vein, identifying the *past cause* of the present situation . . . But maybe you came across the book “by chance”, just because you saw it on the shelf? The cause is thus *present*. Maybe you *feel* it could be interesting, even useful in your daily life, both personal and professional? So you look through it for new ideas, to learn and understand: the reason for your interest is thus in the *future*, a discovery-in-waiting. The question is no longer “why” are you reading, but “what for”: traditional *causalism* (so dear to science and psychoanalysis) gives way to finalism (or *purposefulness*, as exemplified by art and Gestalt). Another example: why did I go to

bed early last night? I was certainly tired (past cause), but in fact I wanted to be well-rested for the seminar *today* (future cause).

Just like modern cars, we function with “front-wheel drive” more often than with rear-wheel drive. We are “pulled along” by our projects, just as we are “pushed forward” by our past. We function in four-wheel drive mode! Gestalt Therapy is complementary to psychoanalytical thought (long-term archeological excavation to reveal the *past*, which partly conditions us): Gestalt concentrates on *the present and the future*. In this way we can become aware of the freedom to build anew. As Lao-Tseu said (Chinese philosopher who founded Taoism, around 500 BC), a lantern at the *back* of the car sheds little light on the road ahead!

Many of our habits, that have become certainties, deserve to be examined. Let us savor the plethora of paradoxes! Contrary to popular thought, we will see that:

- We are equally influenced by past and future,
- Synthesis often precedes analysis,
- The surface reveals as much as the hidden depths,
- Theories are but temporary hypotheses,
- Aggression is a necessary “life drive”,
- Symptom amplification can help healing,
- Pleasure is more effective than effort,
- Excessive emotional restraint can lead to cancer,
- Adaptation can impoverish,
- Content may be less important than context: “how” is more significant than “why”.

These things and many others, which punctuate this book, are part of what we could call the “**Gestalt Revolution**”.

Gestalt can help us to renew our values and value systems, freely and responsibly.

This book

This book is not a Gestalt course. It does not aim to *teach* something—which must be *experienced*: is it possible to appreciate a symphony or a painting by reading about it, or to learn to swim without getting wet?

For those of you who already have some experience of Gestalt, and who want to know more, there is another book in French by the same author which is more detailed and yet remains accessible: *La Gestalt, une thérapie du contact*, Paris, 1987 (8th edition: 2005). This is a reference book especially for trainees and therapists—already published in 6 languages.

This English translation is meant to be an *introduction* to Gestalt, for the general public, for those who want to live with their times, who want a *new understanding* of what happens around us and with us, as a new century begins—a century of communication, of cultural exchange, of *contact*. It is not scientifically *exhaustive*, but offers *food for thought*. We also include items of cultural and practical interest, concerning the brain, dreams, sexuality, etc.

Reading the chapters in order is suggested, but each may be read independently, or in order of interest (*disorder* which is characteristic of individual initiative). If you are eager to understand a particular concept, please refer to the *glossary* or the *index*.

Finally, the last chapter summarizes *Twenty fundamental Concepts in Gestalt Therapy*.

Gestalt Therapy is still growing all over the world: there are now specialized training institutes in 50 countries of all continents, and more than 20 Journals. It became one of the most widespread psychotherapies after psychoanalysis and cognitive-behavior therapies.

This introductory book has already been translated into Spanish, Italian, Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, Romanian, Latvian and Japanese.

I wish you enjoyable reading! I always enjoy hearing my readers' reactions. So feel free to contact me:

Serge Ginger
Paris, 2007
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Note

1. *Translator's note*: for simplicity, we have kept the French masculine form to include both genders.

CHAPTER ONE

What is Gestalt?

Gestalt Theory

OK, so why do we use this unusual word *Gestalt*, and what exactly does it mean?

In fact, *Gestalt* is a German word. That's why it is spelt with a capital G, except when used as an adjective. Gestalt is sometimes translated as "shape, form or figure" (as in "*Gestalt Theory*" = "theory of shape or form"), but the real meaning of the word is much richer and more complex, and is impossible to translate. That is why we use the German word in English, Russian, French and even Japanese!

The verb *gestalten* means "to give shape or significant structure to". The result, the *Gestalt*, is a complete shape or figure, which has *structure* and *meaning*. For example, a *table* may take on a different meaning, if it is used for work (covered with books) or for dining (set with tablecloth, plates and cutlery): its overall *Gestalt* has changed.

Since the very beginning of our life, the first important "shape" or "figure" that we recognize is a *Gestalt*: our mother's face. The newborn does not distinguish the details, but the form as a whole is "significant" for him.

The way we see things follows certain rules: a global appreciation (such as a human face) cannot be reduced to the sensory appreciation of each component; similarly, water is not just oxygen and hydrogen, neither is a symphony a simple string of notes. In each of these examples, *the whole is different from the sum of its parts*.

At the same time, *a part within a whole is different from the part on its own, or the same part within another whole*—the part's identity depends upon its position and function relative to the whole. Thus, a shout at a ball game is not the same as a shout in a deserted street; singing naked in the shower is quite different to singing naked in Times Square!

In order to understand a particular behavior or situation, it is not enough to *analyze* it. A *synthetic* point of view is most important, to appreciate the situation in the larger *overall context*. Rather than paying attention only to details, we can step back and see the “big picture”: the “context” is often more important than the “text”. To appreciate a political event in another country, it is not enough to send a foreign correspondent; it is more important to have a global, *synthetic* appreciation of the international economy and an understanding of what is at stake.

Gestalt Therapy

Having touched on some of the general principles of Gestalt *Theory*, let us turn to what this book is really about: the applications in Gestalt *Therapy* (GT). To avoid confusion, I could systematically use the word “therapy”, but I will deliberately refrain from doing so, as “therapy” is often interpreted as “treatment of *illness*”, in spite of the statement from the WHO (the *World Health Organization*) saying that:

“Health is *not* the absence of illness or of infirmity, but is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being.”

In such a global, “holistic” (from the Greek, “*holos*”, whole) point of view, Gestalt therapy aims for the development and maintenance of such a harmonious state and not for a “cure”. Cure refers implicitly to a state of “normality”, which is the opposite of the Gestalt approach. In Gestalt, the *right to be different* is highly valued, as is the uniqueness of each person.

This notion of *therapy* is similar to that of *personal development*, the growth of human potential. It is quite different from normalizing influences, based on health and social adaptation. The very first Greek “therapists” were not caretakers, they were *slaves*, whose job was looking after statues of gods; subsequently, there was a Jewish

sect of monks, called “therapists”, who analyzed sacred texts. Both of these roles involved strengthening the links between gods and men or between Heaven and Earth, mind and matter, between the Word and the flesh. To begin with, therapy sought *psychosomatic harmony* and not medical care. This is the sense that has most meaning in the “new humanistic therapies”, which include Gestalt.

Thus, for Goldstein (New York, 1934), one of Perls’ (the founder of Gestalt) mentors,

“Normal must be defined, not by adaptation, but on the contrary, by the ability to invent new norms.”

Gestalt Therapy: who is it for?

Gestalt Therapy is used in a variety of situations, with multiple aims:

- **Individual** psychotherapy (the client with the therapist);
- **Couple** therapy (the two spouses together);
- **Family** therapy (several family members at the same time);
- **Group** therapy, or development of personal potential;
- **Within organizations** (schools, psychiatric hospitals, institutions for maladjusted youth, etc.);
- **In businesses**, industry and commerce, to improve contact and communication, enrich human relations, manage conflicts, and stimulate creativity.

Gestalt Therapy is not limited to those *suffering* from psychological, physical or psychosomatic difficulties. It also helps people faced with *existential problems*, which are, unfortunately, very common (conflict, separation, sexual problems, loneliness, bereavement, depression, unemployment, etc.). Gestalt can in fact be useful to *any person* (or group) seeking to develop hidden potential, not only *well-being* but also “*better-being*”, a better *quality of life*.

To summarize, Gestalt is a natural, universal approach, for people of all ages, all levels, from diverse cultural backgrounds and in a variety of situations. In fact, Perls considered his method too good to be reserved for the ill and the odd, and he often spoke of it, in a provocative manner, as “therapy for normal people”.

Gestalt Therapy: History and Geography

So what is this “new therapy”, still incompletely defined for the public, and also known as *here-and-now therapy*, *contact therapy*, *existential psychoanalysis*, *integrative therapy*, *imaginary psychodrama* . . . and who knows what else?

By the 1980's, Gestalt had become one of the most widespread therapeutic, personal development and training methods in the USA. In some countries, it became as popular as psychoanalysis. In the USA, Gestalt is frequently taught to psychologists, social workers, ministers, youth workers and the Army. It is estimated that several hundreds of thousands of people have had individual or group sessions.

With its European roots, Gestalt rapidly became popular in Anglo-Saxon and Germanic countries. It is now continuing to spread over every continent: Canada, Latin America, Australia, Russia, Japan, etc. In Germany, Gestalt is taught in many institutes since 1969, and there are now over 2,000 professionals (including social workers, trainers, consultants, teachers, psychiatrists, psychologists—as well as Gestalt-pedagogues and Gestalt-gerontologists).

Gestalt Therapy: a brief presentation

Gestalt was developed from the intuitions of *Fritz Perls*, a Jewish psychoanalyst from Germany, who immigrated to the USA at the age of 53.

Gestalt Therapy was *conceived* with *Ego, Hunger and Aggression* Perls' first book. It was published in 1942, in South Africa, where Perls lived for a time during Nazi persecution.

Gestalt Therapy was born and *baptized* in 1951, when the book *Gestalt Therapy* was published in New York. The Gestalt movement grew slowly, and became famous much later in California, in 1968. The “hippies” were questioning the established value systems, and were seeking creativity (“Power to the imagination!”) and responsibility for one's actions (“self-management”). It was time to emphasize *being* rather than *having*, *knowledge* instead of *power*.

Today, Gestalt rather than being just another psychotherapy, can be seen as a true *existential philosophy*, an “art of living” with authentic contact, and a way of looking at how we relate to the world.

Traditional priorities are often reversed: synthetic global view is valued over analytical approaches; looking to the future (finalism) is more important than looking for “causes” in the past; creativity and originality are emphasized, rather than normalization.

Perls and his colleagues (especially Laura Perls and Paul Goodman) had the genius to build a *coherent synthesis* of several philosophical, methodological and therapeutic methods, from *Europe, America and the East*. A new “Gestalt” was formed, where “the whole is different from the sum of its parts”: by using traditional “bricks”, a new and completely original structure was created (with the same bricks, one can build a prison or a cathedral . . .).

Gestalt is at the intersection of *psychoanalysis*, Reichian *body therapies* (from Wilhelm Reich, psychoanalyst and Freudian dissident), *psychodrama*, *phenomenological and existential approaches* and *Eastern philosophies*.

Gestalt develops a *unifying* vision of the human being, which integrates *senses, feelings, thought, social relationships and spirituality*. This paves the way towards a *holistic* experience, where the body can “speak” and words can be “seen and felt”.

The emphasis is on *becoming aware of what is happening here and now* (present experience may of course include feelings about a past event). *Physical sensations and emotions* find their place: these are so often taboo in modern cultures, and lead towards strictly *controlled* public expression of anger, sadness, worry, but also affection, love and joy!

Authentic *contact* with others, *creative adjustment* (*creative adaptation of the organism to its environment*), and awareness of *repetitive* reactions and habits that are no longer useful can all be improved. Gestalt highlights these *blockages* in our *normal cycle* of need-fulfillment, it also highlights our avoidances, our fears, our inhibitions and our illusions.

Gestalt not only tries to *explain* why, it encourages *experimentation* with new *solutions* for old problems. It is not just a matter of “knowing why”: Gestalt adds “feeling how”, which motivates change.

In Gestalt therapy, each person is *responsible* for his own choices and avoidances. The individual works at the rate and level that suits him, according to what emerges in the present moment. He may see,