

Shrink Rap Radio #21, January 14, 2006. Gestalt Therapy Interview

Dr. David Van Nuys, aka “Dr. Dave,” interviews Dr. Victor Daniels
(transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Kip Watkins)

Introduction: Vicor Daniels, Ph.D. is Professor of Psychology and past chair at Sonoma State University. He is co-author of the book, *Being and Caring: A Psychology for Living*, which is used at many universities.

In my early days as a psychotherapist, Gestalt Therapy was all the rage. If you've visited the Shrink Rap Radio website, you know that each fall I co-lead a workshop with Dr. Ron Alexander in Europe. And we rely heavily on Gestalt techniques in that work. So I thought I would give you some exposure to Gestalt Therapy by interviewing my long time friend and colleague, Dr. Victor Daniels, who not only is an editor of an online Gestalt Therapy journal, but also teaches an undergraduate class on it at Sonoma State University where he is a Professor and past department chair. Here is the interview.

Dr. Dave: Victor Daniels, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Daniels: Thank you.

Dr. Dave: To get us started, I'm not sure how familiar my listeners are with Gestalt Therapy. Maybe you could begin by describing exactly what it is and give us a brief overview of its historical development.

Daniels: Gestalt Therapy is a method that's used in both therapy and counseling that addresses the entire person. That is, a great deal of therapy, people will sit in a chair and have what looks like an ordinary conversation just talking back and forth. But Gestalt Therapy recognizes that the problems that people have often are locked into their bodies, their muscular contractions, their emotions, their movements, their way of being, standing, body language, all of this sort of thing. And so Gestalt Therapy addresses all of those things as appropriate in any given session.

Dr. Dave: Ok. So, it's a form of talk therapy but not *just* talk therapy. Right? There are elements that make it more interactive?

Danielst: Right. It depends on the practitioner of course. There are many different Gestalt practitioners working from the same theoretical framework and some of them tend to be more comfortable relying just on conversation. One of the other elements that's often present in Gestalt Therapy is the use of enactments. That is, if a person has some kind of a difficulty or an issue with another person in their present life, or with someone in their past, some traumatic past situation or painful past situation, then the person might be asked to put that other individual in an empty chair, which is facing a chair that they're sitting in, and actually talk to them. And then they may go over and take the part of that other person and reply. And then when they go and sit and take the part of the other person, I might say, I'd like you to assume the other person's posture, use his or her voice. Speak as he would speak. Act as he would act, so that we get an actual sample of what the other person looks like. And that conveys a tremendous amount of information that's not present in ordinary talking therapy.

Dr. Dave: Right. You're also getting some bodily involvement from the person.

Daniels: Yeah. Bodily involvement. And that bodily involvement may be exaggerated as well. If a person is doing something or other, like a helpless shrugging of the shoulders as they talk, they may be asked to exaggerate that helpless shrugging of the shoulders and see what kind of feelings or words come as they do that. They may be asked in the course of a working session to get up and walk around the room expressing a particular thing that they're saying as they sit in the chair and even to exaggerate that walking around which then often can serve as kind of a magnifying glass or microscope, as you were, to bring something to a person's awareness that they weren't previously aware of.

Dr. Dave: Ok, good. Now, to back up just a little bit, just give us a very brief overview of the history of Gestalt therapy. Where did it come from?

Daniels: Well, it really originated, was formally originated (Gestalt Therapy as such) in New York City. But the roots of it go back to Europe and to Germany and Austria. It had several roots. One of them was the German Gestalt Psychology that came out of the work of Carl Stumpf, Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka, and Wolfgang Kohler. And they were concerned with the way people perceived the world and perceived themselves. And their view of things was that instead of perceiving in bits and pieces, like

most psychologists were thinking about in those days, a person is constantly searching for meaningful configurations. And they're configuring their experience, whatever that experience is, whatever the situation is, into those kind of meaningful configurations. So that was the early Gestalt Psychology that was one of the roots of Gestalt Therapy.

Dr. Dave: Right, and I remember that part of that perceptual, theoretical structure was that we tend to see things in wholes rather than in parts. So that, for example, three dots we tend to see as a triangle rather than just three dots.

Daniels: Mm hmm. And the very word "Gestalt" means "patterns, wholes, configuration."

Dr. Dave: Right. So, moving it into the therapeutic arena, along comes Fritz Perls, right? Tell us a little bit about him.

Daniels: Well, Fritz Perls was originally trained as a psychoanalyst. He was not trained by Freud himself, but he was trained by a number of the best psychoanalysts in Europe. Karen Horney, for example, with her notion of the "tyranny of the shoulds." The way that we end up acting on the basis of things that we've internalized, that other people have told us, or messages from our past, instead of acting in ways that actually fit the present situation. He worked with Wilhelm Reich who really introduced the body into psychology. Before Reich, psychology was essentially a "mind affair" and Reich said, no, the person's actually experiencing and enacting in the body, in the muscle tensions and so on the things that they do. So psychoanalysis was another element that became part of Gestalt Therapy.

Perls, when he was a young man, was involved in theater. And his wife, Laura, was involved in dance and modern dance. So both of them from those different perspectives brought a different kind of body dimension. And the enactive dimension in theater, Perls also later studied psychodrama with Moreno in New York. So that brought in the idea of acting out rather than simply telling about. One other element let me just briefly mention and that's a kind of mediative or attention to awareness to our present experience came in, in part from Zen, in part from other sources, but one of the central principles of Gestalt is that in many cases you don't have to set out a program for change as you do in behavioral psychology but rather there is a paradoxical theory of change which is that as you become sufficiently aware of what you're doing now, it opens the way for spontaneous change to occur. So, that's actually one of the central emphases of Gestalt is to become aware, to help the client become aware of

what of it is they are actually doing in the present that they're not actively aware of.

Dr. Dave: Ok. That's great. So one of the principles is being in the now; working in the now which, evidently, was influenced a lot by his exposure to zen. Are there other key principles that stand out to you of Gestalt Therapy? What are the sort of three or four or five pillars of Gestalt Therapy that come to mind?

Daniels: First let me clarify, for a moment, the notion of working in the now. There's a good deal of misunderstanding about that. Some people have misinterpreted that to think that, "well, it's only supposed to mean that you're dealing with what's happening in the person's life now and you're not supposed to talk about the past." That's actually not at all the case. Freud was quite right in noting that many things that happen earlier in life, whether it's in early childhood, in a previous marriage, in the school yard, with a teacher, or whatever. There are traumatic and painful experiences that happened in the past that influence the person in the present because the person acts in the present as if he were still in those difficult past situations. The difference is that, with Gestalt Therapy, the past situation is not talked about in a story telling kind of fashion. Rather, the person mentions it and then that past situation is described as if it were happening now and may be enacted, as I described earlier, in the present.

So for example, one time I recall a person whose parents had died in a crash with a Greyhound bus. The person was in the back seat and it was *the* traumatic experience of her life. And obviously we didn't just want to leave it alone because it was influencing her so powerfully. And so we had her remember, re-enact, relive in the present that past experience, talk about it in such a way that it had a presentness to it and that allowed her to work through and let go of many of the most painful feelings about it. Similarly the future: a person may have apprehensions about the future but they exist in the now. So we work with those worries, those apprehensions and anxieties in the now.

Dr. Dave: That's a helpful clarification. I think of taking responsibility as being another key principle. Do you want to say a little bit about that?

Daniels: That's a key one. That came in part, was brought in from existential philosophy and there is the notion that people are constantly blaming other people. One of my favorite expressions there is people often blame what they do now on the way they were brought up or what happened to them when they were kids. And my, slightly off-color,

expression there is, “well, if that's what you're going to do, then you're stuck up shit creek without a paddle.” And what Gestalt Therapy attempts to do is give people a paddle. And part of that paddle is responsibility, saying, “you are responsible. You may have done whatever you have done, you may have been whatever you have been until now, but the next thing that you do is your choice.” And so there's a very strong emphasis on choice. Would you like the third element?

Dr. Dave: You have a third element?

Daniels: You asked for several.

Dr. Dave: Ok. Go ahead. Give us one more.

Daniels: Well, there is the notion of figure and ground in the old Gestalt perceptual psychology. And there is always something that is present, and figural, and central in our experience and then we deal with that until it's dealt with in a satisfactory way and then it recedes into the background and something else comes in and becomes figural. Now, in perceptual psychology, that would be, for example, someone who needs to mail a letter in the mailbox two blocks down they spot it and then as soon as that letter is dropped into it, that drops out of their awareness and something else comes forward. In working sessions, the same kind of thing tends to happen.

And then perhaps a fourth principle that's very important to mention is that of organismic self regulation. The goal of Gestalt Therapy is not that we become a totally self-realized, self-actualized person. That takes a lifetime. We're all in the process of getting there. But the goal is that a person becomes capable of regulating himself in relationship to his or her present environment as a whole mind-body organism in a way that is as capable as possible of fulfilling his or her needs in that moment and also respecting the needs of the other people who are present in the situation in that moment.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Now, Fritz Perls, the founder who we discussed a little bit, he was a pretty wild and colorful character when he was alive. I'm wondering if you have a favorite Fritz Perls story.

Daniels: He was actually a very wild and colorful character in his latter days. He was not as wild and colorful earlier on. He wore conservative suits, etc. etc. When he came out to the west coast, it was the “Hippy” era and the whole culture, or the whole counter-culture, was wild and colorful and he adopted that and wore kinds of things that fit into it; colorful

clothing and so on. My favorite story about him is probably the one about himself and Abraham Maslow at Esalan Institute. As I mentioned, Fritz was into theater and enacting and dramatizing things. And he had relatively little patience for what he termed “bullshit.” And “bullshit” tended to be when people were avoiding or talking in ways that were not really engaged. There was a situation where he and a number of other big time psychologists were sitting around at Esalan and having a discussion and Abe Maslow was present and several other people. And someone was rambling on and on and on and Fritz' eyeballs started rolling and other people's eyeballs started rolling in the room. And everybody has heard situations like that where someone is just gone on beyond their time and keeps repeating themselves. So Fritz kind of slid down onto the floor and then moved across the floor on his hands and knees like a dog and grabbed hold of the other person's leg as if he were a dog biting at the person's leg. Of course, all of a sudden, everyone was immediately present and this was the thing that was happening and Maslow looked down at him and said, “this appears to be something a little like sickness to me.” And everyone cracked up and the situation went into a much more engaging and interesting turn.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, Fritz could be quite a provocateur and I guess often he did it deliberately to shake things up and to get a stuck or static situation moving.

Daniels: The central theory behind that or reason, I should say, is that a great deal of what we do is old past patterns that are habitual but that are automatic and stale and don't really fit the present in that there is no aliveness left to them. And when he was confrontational it was actually in the service of what another Gestalt therapist, Claudio Naranjo, called suppressive techniques, to temporarily suppress the inauthentic old response to allow a possibility for something new and spontaneous to emerge; to allow the person to be present instead of just re-playing their old tapes again and again.

Dr. Dave: Ok. Now you're one of the editors of an online journal on Gestalt Therapy. So you've got kind of an overview of the field. From your perspective, as an editor, what trends or evolution do you see in Gestalt Therapy?

Daniels: Well, there are several. One is that it has, over the last few years or really the last decade, been moving very strongly in an international direction. There is quite an active European Gestalt Therapy association. Started in Britain but now there are many Gestalt therapists in Germany

and Italy. At a recent conference last summer, we had a number of people from Russia. So the Gestalt Therapy is quite active in Europe. It's quite active in Australia and New Zealand. There's "GANZ", the Gestalt Association of Australia and New Zealand, and some very good practitioners there. And in Latin America, it's very strong. Many of the therapists there have moved to Gestalt from psychoanalysis. And the Mexico City Gestalt Institute, for example, has branches in seven or eight other different Mexican cities. And in Argentina and Brazil it's both strong. So that's one trend.

Another trend is that there is more interchange among use of diverse Gestalt methodologies. Fritz moved out to the west coast. He and Laura, in a sense, he went off on long trips and didn't come home very often. They never divorced or separated. But what happened was that, Fritz ended up developing the fullest expression of Gestalt Therapy on the west coast, with its enactive dimension, whereas Laura remained in New York and she remained primarily doing awareness work, did more talking and less having people actually act out their experiences. And so there tended to be a group of people who were trained by Laura and a group of people who were trained by Fritz and you had an east coast Gestalt and a west coast Gestalt developing. And one of the things in recent years is that, in the conferences and in the dialogues, you'll find people who tend to dominantly work in one modality, shifting to the other one when it's appropriate in the situation. That's a second direction of work.

You find the conference this coming summer, revolves around transforming consciousness and using the conceptions of Gestalt, in a sense, to bring them further out into the culture and in society. So there is more connection and interchange with meditation. There's been considerable movement in using it in organizational consulting. There are quite a few Gestalt-ish organizational consultants these days that are attempting to help companies and government organizations. Those are some of the directions.

Dr. Dave: I wasn't aware of that. That's interesting. How did you personally come to be involved with Gestalt Therapy?

Daniels: I actually got into it through a somewhat unorthodox method. My story is probably quite different from, and not representative of, most Gestalt Therapists. I had taken my doctorate at UCLA in experimental social psychology and had begun teaching. At one point I concluded, as a young man in my late 20s, that it would do me some good to do some personal therapy. The person I was referred to was a Gestalt therapist and

it was Gestalt group therapy. Gestalt therapy is often done in groups of perhaps anywhere from 6 to 12 people. And those have the advantage of people can watch each other work and watching the other people's work often opens up important insights and awarenesses in themselves. So in the process of the work I would be watching the therapist work with other people, when it was not my own turn, and I found after a couple of months I was beginning to anticipate what he was going to do. "Ah, gee, is he going to do this thing next?" And I just became so utterly and completely fascinated by the process that I never left it. I went on from there to training groups to numerous study workshops; studied with a great many practitioners; went back studied with the same person, etc.; and found that it was, for me, the richest, the most productive, the most vital and alive thing that I've seen in psychology. So, I was drawn to it by those qualities.

Dr. Dave: Ok, well you started out as a client; as a patient, if you will.

Daniels: That's exactly right.

Dr. Dave: And can you share with us, just briefly, how it impacted and changed your life as a client?

Daniels: Sure! One of the issues. Well, I had a couple of issues, or several. We all have issues. And one of mine was I had a hard time standing up to people who were making demands on me, a hard time saying "no". And, as a kid, we had moved around all the time and I was an only child and always the new kid on the block and often kind of the brunt of bullies, and even groups of them. And so I was relatively easily intimidated and I had, at least on a physical level, and that manifested itself in various ways. In my dreams, for example, I had dreams of people running after me, chasing me, shooting at me, and things of this sort. And so that was one of the areas that I dealt with. And dealing with that, one I dealt successfully. There was one dream in particular I remember vividly because it was the first piece of Gestalt work I ever personally did. I was at a boxing match. I was in the ring with another person and was boxing kind of lackadaisically and there was the other person over there. And then our match was done and I watched another match. And in that second match that I watched there was this one small, vigorous boxer who was like small and quick and he was punching and punching and was very, very aggressive in the ring. And the therapist said, "all right. Now I want you to go back into the ring and you be that little guy." And I became that little guy. And all of a sudden I found a tolerance and assertiveness and a willingness to stand up that I had lacked. And I began to take that into my daily life as well: saying no when I felt no instead of feeling like I wanted

to say no but giving in anyway. And so it made a powerful difference in the kind of personal power that I felt in my own life. And the dreams changed drastically too.

Dr. Dave: Oh, that's great. And that was a good example too because I know that dream work is also a central focus often in Gestalt Therapy. Now you teach an undergraduate class on Gestalt Therapy with an experiential component and my guess is that that's probably pretty unusual at the undergraduate level. Is that your impression as well?

Daniels: I know of only one other. And I've forgotten which institution it is, but there's one that's taught in New York City. It may be New York University or City University of New York. I've forgotten which. It is unusual and it's too bad because it's such a magnificent technique and it's practically always my favorite class. And the students who take it, many of them often say, "gee, you know, this was the best thing that happened to me in my whole undergraduate career."

Dr. Dave: Wow. If you could give our listeners one tip or one self-help technique based on Gestalt, what would it be?

Daniels: Sure. That would be that in any situation, when the person finds themselves being asked to do something rather, if they notice that their body is tensing and tightening up somewhere, do they notice that their stomach is getting tight, are they clenching their fists, are they feeling tight in their sphincter or their jaws, then pay attention. There's a good chance that, in that kind of a situation, that they are about to, or engaged in, agreeing to a request where they really feel a "no" from deeper down in their organism. Or, by contrast, where they really want to say yes but where their old past conditioning has told them, "no, I'm not supposed to do this. I shouldn't." So paying attention to those kinds of body cues are almost always clues to what the person really feels at a deep level. That can save a person all kinds of trouble. It can save them trouble in relationships. It can save a person from getting taken advantage of by some kind of a con man who's got a clever song and dance. It can be useful in a whole variety of situations.

Dr. Dave: Great. That's a great tip. And, finally, is there a book or two that you would recommend to any listeners who are seeking to learn more about Gestalt Therapy.

Daniels: Well, there are both old books and there are new ones. Actually, the most entertaining and interesting of all of the books ever written about

it, I think, is called “In and Out of the Garbage Pail” and it's Fritz Perls' autobiography. It's not about Gestalt Therapy, per se, but it conveys a remarkable dimension of it. It's a flow of consciousness and when he hits blocks in his writing process, he simply writes through them, describing what's going on in them as he does that. Unlike some other psychologists, he's very easy to read in that book.

The other books by Fritz Perls himself that I would recommend (and that last name is spelled without an “A”). Many people make the mistake of thinking that there's an “A” in it like the jewelry). There is one called “Gestalt Therapy Verbatim” and there is another one that is called “The Gestalt Approach – Eye Witness to Therapy”. So those are very good. Another of my very favorites is by, actually it's by what is probably the most prominent living Gestalt therapist, but any therapist practicing any approach could get a great deal from picking up Erving Polster, “Every Person's Life is Worth a Novel.” And that's a small book on psychotherapy and it's about Gestalt Therapy but the tips in it are applicable in any realm and it's also just a wonderfully readable book full of great stories. I think those are great starting points.

Dr. Dave: Boy, you've given us a lot of really good starting points.

Daniels: Let me add just one other for people who are really interested in family stuff. I'll add a book that's not specifically primarily a Gestalt Therapy book but it's by a woman who was trained in Gestalt Therapy who then took training that into Family Systems Therapy and brought much of the same perspective in. So for people who are in families or families that are having divorces or blended families or are having family problems of whatever kind, Virginia Satir has a book called “The New People Making” out. And that's also excellent to read. There's also a lot of stuff on Satir on the web. There's not that much about...

And if anyone is interested in terms of portals, if anyone would like to walk into the world of Gestalt and read articles and look at institutes and just see what that whole world is like, they can go to the Gestalt page on my own website which is a portal that has many doors to the whole Gestalt world. All you do to get there is just put my name, Victor Daniels, into any search engine and my home page will be the first or second thing that comes up, or third maybe. And there is often an old Cherokee Indian who was Chief Thundercloud who played Tonto in the original Lone Ranger movies also named Victor Daniels.

Dr. Dave: I'll put a link to your home page on the show notes so people can find it there.

Daniels: And then the first thing under that is Gestalt Therapy and Gestalt Psychology and they just click there and they're into the whole Gestalt world.

Dr. Dave: Ok. Well we have run out of time. But thank you so much for giving us this wonderful introduction to Gestalt Therapy. So Victor, consider yourself shrunk and rapped.

Daniels: All right. Thank you David. It's been a pleasure.

Dr. Dave: Ok, buh-bye.