

On Perls, Freud, Grief and Chairwork

By: Scott Kellogg, PhD

Dr. Friedrich “Fritz” Perls had a very difficult relationship with his father when growing up, and I think that this created a “Father Wound” in him that would haunt him. After serving in the military in World War I, he went on to become a psychiatrist and a psychoanalyst. Karen Horney seems to have been something of a mother figure to him and he would have a profound, if curtailed, experience working with Wilhelm Reich.

In 1936, he attended the International Psychoanalytic Conference in Marienbad, Czechoslovakia; he had gone there to present a paper on Oral Defenses. Perls had lived in Berlin but when the Nazis came to power, he, his wife Laura, and their daughter Renata had to flee. They ended up in Johannesburg, South Africa, where he started the first Psychoanalytic Institute.

Perls had never met Freud. When he arrived at the conference hotel, he went to Freud’s room and knocked on the door. Freud, for whatever reason, was very cool to him. He stood in his doorway and did not invite Perls into his room. When Perls told him that he had just come from South Africa, Freud asked him when he was returning, and, after three or four minutes, he ended the conversation. This rejection would haunt Perls for the rest of his life. Adding to the pain of his experience, his paper was not well received at the conference. Strikingly, it was this extremely negative experience that opened the door for him to go on to create Gestalt Therapy.

Thirty years later, Perls is now becoming world-famous through his extraordinary workshops at the Esalen Institute and his masterful use of Chairwork as a central modality. In his book, *The Gestalt Approach and Eyewitness to Therapy* (Perls, 1973), there is a description of a workshop session that he did with a therapist named Barbara – a woman who is wrestling with self-esteem and competence issues. Using his model of projection, he likely understood her to be someone who had disavowed her sense of personal competence, while projecting it on to others.

To help her reclaim her disowned energies, he playfully suggests that they should they switch roles – that she be “Fritz” – and he be the patient. After they began a dialogue,

he made a disparaging comment about Freud. She, now being “Fritz”, catches this and invites him to put Freud in another chair and have a dialogue with him. Suddenly, things became quite serious.

As he imagined Freud in the chair opposite and brought him into awareness, Barbara asked him what he was feeling. Perls said quite seriously, “A great sorrow that Freud is dead because I could really talk man to man with him” (p. 205).

She then invited him to speak with Freud directly. Part of what he said included: “Professor Freud...A great man...But very sick...You can’t let anyone touch you.I wish you would listen to me. In a certain way I know more than you do.”

After saying a few more things and several moments of silence, he turned to Barbara and said, “So, your copy of Fritz wasn’t so bad. (Gives Barbara a kiss) You did something for me.” To which she replied, “Thank you, Fritz” (p. 206).

Perls was very taken with this experience and mentioned it in his autobiography, *In and Out the Garbage Pail* (Perls, 1969).

This is a story that I have told many times in my trainings as a way of demonstrating the power of Chairwork when working with grief and loss. There is, however, a coda to this.

I recently heard the late Cyndy Sheldon¹ tell a story that must have taken place after the incident that I just described. Perls was running a workshop at Esalen, and he turned to Jim Simkin and asked him to be the therapist because he wanted to work on his unfinished business with Freud. He put Freud in an “empty chair” and, as he spoke with him, he “started sobbing. He sobbed and sobbed and sobbed.” – which had a mesmerizing effect on all who were in attendance.

I am very touched by this story, and I think it is, yet again, one more profoundly beautiful example of the extraordinary healing power of Chairwork.

¹ Cyndy Sheldon (2021) Egalitarian relationships from a Gestalt Perspective. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NqtellCddMo> – at 16:45.

References

Perls, F. S. (1969). *In and out the garbage pail*. New York: Bantam Books.

Perls, F. (1973). *The Gestalt approach and eyewitness to therapy*. United States: Science and Behavior Books

