



David—front view, by Michelangelo Buonarroti (Photo courtesy of Art Resource, New York).

# Humanistic and Transpersonal Psychology

---

*A Historical and  
Biographical Sourcebook*

*Edited by* DONALD MOSS

*Foreword by* STANLEY KRIPPNER

Schools of Psychological Thought



Greenwood Press 1999  
Westport, Connecticut • London

*Laura Perls and Gestalt Therapy: Her Life and Values*

ILENE AVA SERLIN AND PAUL SHANE

LAURA PERLS, A NEGLECTED FACTOR IN GESTALT THERAPY

The development of Gestalt therapy has been associated in the popular mind and in cultural myth with the aggressive, dramatic, and unusual personality of the late Frederick "Fritz" Perls. But now that enough time has passed, it is slowly coming to general consciousness within the field of psychotherapy that much of what was considered Gestalt therapy—that is, the "Fritz" style of working with the "empty chair" and the like—is but one particular form and that the other two codevelopers of Gestalt therapy, Laura Perls and Paul Goodman, made equally substantial although far-different contributions to its formulation, application, and dissemination.

The problem, at its simplest, is that Fritz Perls was Gestalt therapy's most successful promoter and proselytizer. In other words, he became more famous than either his wife or Goodman and so made a far larger impact, at least initially. This was primarily because of his wide traveling and public demonstrations—his weekend "circuses," as he called them—as well as through his published works, the audiovisual documentation of his workshops, and the prominent place he held at Esalen Institute during the glory days of the fledgling human-potential movement in the 1960s. In all fairness, Fritz was a brilliant, creative, and intuitive therapist as well as possessing a charismatic, courageous, and powerful personality. Esalen, for a time, became his own "bully pulpit" from which he preached the gospel of Gestalt therapy according to his own particular viewpoint. All of these things naturally made Gestalt therapy and Fritz Perls's way of practicing it syn-



Laura Perls (Photo courtesy of the Gestalt Journal Press).

onymous, but although he often liked to take credit for it, and perhaps this too is understandable because most certainly he was its primary inspiration and source of technical innovation, he did not work alone; there were also Laura Perls and Goodman.

In one respect, Fritz Perls's success in spreading his particular style of Gestalt therapy was based on being at the right place at the right time. The 1960s counterculture emphasized freedom, liberation, and rebellion—"I do my thing and you do yours"—which dovetailed almost seamlessly with Fritz Perls's "Nietzschean" ideals of radical autonomy and individual growth. Laura Perls and Goodman, on the other hand, were personally and professionally more devoted to connection and community involvement; the ideals of Martin Buber and Lao-tzu, among others, were their respective touchstones.

Goodman, an author of fiction and political criticism in the anarchistic-communitarian vein, had studied Freud and was a devotee of Reichian therapy at the time he met Fritz and Laura Perls in 1949. Fritz Perls solicited Goodman to edit a manuscript for a new book on what he was calling at the time "concentration therapy," and Goodman later went into therapy with Laura Perls. Goodman, as opposed to Perls, is considered the chief theoretician of Gestalt therapy because he penned the second half of its 1951 manifesto, *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*. Goodman later attained fame equal to that of Fritz Perls through his social and political criticisms and became for a short time a spiritual leader for the antiwar, civil rights, and university-reform movements.

It is thus perhaps understandable that more is known about the flamboyant and charismatic Fritz Perls and Goodman, the Aristotelian social critic and Dutch uncle to the student protest movement, than about Laura Perls and her quiet and distinctly feminine contribution to the development of Gestalt therapy as well as her place in the history of humanistic psychology. Even though Laura Perls lived a full life and outlived both her husband and her dear friend, Goodman, by about twenty years, little has been written either by her or about her. Such lack of documentation, research interest, and public acknowledgment is not unusual from a historical point of view, as has been cogently observed by feminist literary critics. This is very sad, considering that Laura Perls's contribution to the development of Gestalt therapy as well as her influence as a teacher and trainer of psychotherapists for almost forty years ranks her among the vanguard of pioneering female psychologists of the twentieth century along with such lights as Anna Freud, Lou Andreas-Salomé, Karen Horney, Aniela Jaffé, Marie-Louise von Franz, Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, Helene Deutsch, Virginia Satir, and others.

### LIFE

In order to make a small effort toward remedying this situation, we devote the rest of our attention to examining the life and contributions of Laura Perls to Gestalt therapy. Given the limitations of available space, we will confine ourselves to focusing on the primary values she espoused as a teacher and a therapist.

#### Early Years

Lore (later Laura) Posner Perls was born in Pforzheim, Germany, a small town near Frankfurt and the Black Forest, on August 15, 1905. Her family was cultured, upper middle class, and Jewish, although largely assimilated. Her father, Rudolf Posner, earned his living as a jeweler, and Pforzheim was known for its jewelry trade. Hers was a warm, loving, and supportive family; her parents showed a keen interest in their daughter and encouraged her artistic development starting from the age of five, when she was first taught piano by her mother. She studied modern dance from the age of eight on and later eurhythmics and another school of modern dance related to the Eastern-influenced philosophy of Rudolf Steiner (Kudirka, 1992). This later dance experience and training, which included eurhythmics as well as the expressionistic dance theories of Rudolf von Laban and Mary Wigman, would play a significant role in her development as a therapist and in the formulation of Gestalt therapy in regards to movement and support functions of the human body (Serlin, 1992a, 1992b).

Laura Perls attended a classical gymnasium, which, at the time, was a very unusual choice for a girl, and she was the only female enrolled in the school. While there, she studied languages and became fluent in Greek, Latin, and French. She was particularly drawn to literature—she studied classical and modern literature as well as German literature from the Middle Ages to the twentieth

century—and began writing poetry and fiction, a practice she continued throughout her life. Upon graduation, she pressed on to the University of Frankfurt, which was, as she described it, one of the most avant-garde universities in Germany at the time and possibly in all of Europe (Kudirka, 1992). It was her intention to study law, and even though there were few women in the legal profession at that time, she felt drawn to it out of a growing social and political consciousness; she envisioned herself working with juveniles in the German court system (Humphrey, 1986).

But this was not to be, for, as she told the story, she was drawn into psychological studies after attending classes taught by Adhemar Gelb and being impressed by his literate and engaging style of lecturing. She was later to be even further influenced by Kurt Goldstein and Max Wertheimer (L. Perls, 1992). It was during a seminar conducted by Goldstein and Gelb in 1926 that she met Fritz Perls, a young medical student and World War I veteran who was deeply interested in theater and psychoanalysis (Gaines, 1979). Fritz Perls, who was older than she and a free, bohemian spirit, claimed that it was Laura who pursued him into marriage (F. Perls, 1992). But regardless of who pursued whom, Lore Posner married Fritz Perls in 1930 and several years later had their first child, Renate.

Even though at the time of their meeting Fritz Perls was for a brief time an assistant at Kurt Goldstein's neurological clinic for brain-damaged veterans, it was Laura Perls who several historians maintain was more deeply versed in Gestalt psychology. Besides being a student of Gelb, Goldstein, and Wertheimer, she explored the visual perception of color contrasts in her dissertation (Posner, 1932). While there has been much argument among historians of psychology about whether or not there is a valid connection between Gestalt psychology and Gestalt therapy, there can be no doubt that Laura was the living bridge between the two. Before formally studying psychoanalysis, Laura Perls already had firsthand experience as an analyst with an Adlerian psychoanalyst when she was sixteen (Humphrey, 1986). As she noted, she was a Gestalt psychologist first and came later to Freudian psychoanalysis, as opposed to Fritz Perls, who was trained in psychoanalysis first and only had a superficial brush with Gestalt theory (Wysong & Rosenfeld, 1982). While at the university, she studied psychoanalysis under Clara Happel, Otto Fenichel, and Karl Landauer. (Landauer was associated with Sandor Ferenczi and George Groddek and was later killed in a Nazi concentration camp.)

#### Intellectual Influences

Besides receiving a classical education as well as graduate study in clinical and Gestalt psychology, Laura Perls was deeply influenced by the existential and phenomenological philosophers. Much of Gestalt therapy as well as her own personal approach to psychotherapy reflects these intellectual sources. She reported that while in graduate school, she studied the works of Søren Kierkegaard, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Max Scheler and was a student of both Martin

Buber and Paul Tillich for a two-year period. While space does not permit a more detailed review of which ideas of these philosophers helped form the intellectual ground of Gestalt therapy, we do draw attention to the fact that Laura Perls attributed the formation of her style of psychotherapy to the personal and intellectual influences of Buber and Tillich (Kudirka, 1992). The importance of these two particular influences cannot be overstated, as she noted that

Tillich and Buber were much more than what one usually thinks of as theologians. They were really psychologists. . . . They were interested in people, they were not talking about subjects. Listening to Buber and Tillich, you felt they were talking directly to you and not just about some *thing*. The kind of contact they made was essential in their theories. (L. Perls, 1992, pp. 21-22; emphasis in original)

Buber is noted for his idea of the transformative dialogue between the "I and thou"; Tillich, an existential Protestant theologian, later emigrated to the United States and inspired the existential approach of Rollo May (May, 1983). There is some question as to the depth of the relationship between Laura and Tillich, as Tillich is alleged to have told one interviewer that he did not formally meet Laura until sometime in the early 1960s at a cocktail party hosted by Paul Goodman (Wysong, 1996). But regardless, it will be seen later that the concept and value of human contact was central to Laura Perls's approach to Gestalt therapy.

#### Middle Years

As pointed out by Humphrey (1986), by the time she met Fritz Perls and began practicing psychoanalysis, Laura Perls had already been trained as a concert pianist, had a gymnasium education in languages and literature equivalent to that of an American undergraduate degree with dual majors, and had attended law school; she completed her training analysis and received her doctorate in 1932. It was during this year that she and Fritz Perls emigrated from Germany to Holland; being politically sensitive and somewhat active in leftist politics, they shrewdly assessed that the German political situation, although not desperate at that moment, was becoming increasingly worse. While living in abject poverty as refugees in Holland, they were approached by Ernest Jones, an American psychoanalyst and Freud's biographer, to establish a psychoanalytic institute in South Africa. They accepted and for the next fourteen years lived in relatively idyllic security and comfort in that country. They had a second child, Steven, and it was during this South African period that they both began slowly drifting away from orthodox Freudianism (L. Perls, 1992; Wysong & Rosenfeld, 1982).

That drift began with Laura Perls's experience and observations of nursing and weaning her children. She set these observations down into a series of informal notes and, naturally, discussed her experiences with her husband; they both began to become increasingly interested in the oral stage of development and the oral "instinct," as they termed it. These notes were later reworked by Fritz Perls into a lecture, "The Oral Resistances," that he gave at the 1936 International Psycho-

analytic Conference at Marienbad. The presentation was a failure because it was too radical a departure from the Freudian dogma that all resistances are anal in origin (F. Perls, 1992). Disappointed and resentful but not discouraged, Fritz Perls returned to South Africa and began expanding the lecture into what would become the chapter on "Mental Metabolism" in his book *Ego, Hunger, and Aggression* (1969). Although she never received credit for it, Laura Perls claimed that she was instrumental in the development of this first book because she ghostwrote two of its chapters, "The Dummy Complex" and "The Meaning of Insomnia" (L. Perls, 1992). The book itself, overall, was stylistically disjointed and theoretically weak, although it was filled with many keen therapeutic insights and observations (Wheeler, 1991). Twenty years later Perls would downplay its value by saying that the only reason he wrote it was to teach himself how to type (F. Perls, 1992).

Having spent fourteen years in South Africa, Laura Perls and her family were forced once again to emigrate for political reasons; the South African government was becoming more conservative, and apartheid, which was already in the culture, was becoming more rigidly legalized. This caused profound fears on their part of a swing toward fascism, and so they moved, thanks to sponsorship from Laura's brother and Karen Horney, to New York City in 1946-1947 (Wysong & Rosenfeld, 1982). It took less than six months for both Fritz and Laura Perls to establish full-time practices. As Fritz had been working on a manuscript for a new book and needed an editor to help carry it to completion, he sought out Paul Goodman because of his political writings about Wilhelm Reich (Stoehr, 1994). Within a year Goodman left Reichian analysis and became a trainee under Laura Perls.

From Lore Perls he had other kinds of things to learn, more in the realm of give-and-take. For the most part it was not ideas or intellectual gossip that passed between them, however much Lore knew about Gestalt psychology or Frankfurt existentialism or the first generation of Freudians. Rather Goodman came as a patient, ready to confide in her, and hoping for some relief from his sense of failure as a man and an artist. (Stoehr, 1994, p. 53)

With the publication of the 1951 treatise, *Gestalt Therapy*, Fritz and Laura Perls established a training institute in New York City, although he was soon to abandon it as well as his family for his life of wanderlust, as he could not abide the competition or criticism he experienced in both institutions (Gaines, 1979; F. Perls, 1992; Stoehr, 1994; Wysong & Rosenfeld, 1982). It remained up to Laura Perls and a core group of peers and students to support and maintain the New York institute, a task to which she devoted herself for the next forty years.

#### Professional Values

As space does not permit a full exposition of Laura Perls's influence on the development of Gestalt therapy, we will confine ourselves to discussing the key values underlying her work: contact and boundary, support, and style.



*Value: Contact and boundary.*

Following Latner (1992), contact can be defined as the awareness of difference organized in a figure-to-ground relationship at the boundary between the person and his or her environment. In the first formulation of Gestalt therapy, this contact boundary was envisioned as being almost like a physical organ in a metaphorical and functional sense representing conscious awareness (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951). To Laura Perls's mind, contact and the boundary where it occurs were more a psychological and existential phenomenon than its original formulation as a biological metaphor:

Contact is made in any actual present situation, the only moment in which experience and change are possible. . . . It is the acknowledgment of, and the coping with, the *other*. The boundary where I and the other meet is the locus of the ego functions of identification and alienation, the sphere of excitation, interest and curiosity, or fear and hostility. (L. Perls, 1992, p. 131; emphasis in original)

Contact is the touchstone for therapeutic approach and strategy in Gestalt therapy its phenomenological form and experiential quality. As opposed to Fritz Perls, who concentrated mainly on the awareness of a person's contact with the primary object of experience—the primary Gestalt—Laura Perls also emphasized the quality of the client's contact with herself in the therapy situation. Laura Perls was much more apt to engage in looking at the relationship she and her client shared in the moment and used this as an important focus for interpersonal growth. Fritz Perls was more inclined to meet resistance with aggression or rejection (Gaines, 1979), whereas Laura Perls was more concerned with what she called the "psychology of give and take" (L. Perls, 1992); the difference in their personal styles doubtless reflects the respective influences of Nietzsche and Buber, but this is more speculation than verifiable assertion.

*Value: Support.*

Contact, as she so often pointed out in her teaching and therapy work, was made possible **only through** adequate *support*. That is, contact is a function of the **amount of necessary** and sufficient resources, internal and external, that can be mustered to enable the person to undertake the activity.

*Support* is everything that facilitates the ongoing assimilation and integration of experience for a person, a relationship or a society; primary physiology, upright posture and coordination, sensitivity and mobility, language, habits and customs, social manners and relationships, everything else that we have acquired and learned during our lifetime; in short, everything that we usually take for granted and rely on, even and particularly our hang-ups and resistances—the fixed ideas, ideals and behavior patterns which have become our second nature precisely because they were supportive at the time of their formation. (L. Perls, 1992, pp. 132–133; emphasis in original)

Support enables the person to contact what is and to realize the personal meaning and significance of the experience, the "aha!" of personal insight.

*Contact* is possible only to the extent that *support* for it is available. Support is the total background against which the present experience stands out (exists) and forms a meaningful Gestalt. For this is what meaning is: the relation of a figure to its ground. (L. Perls, 1992, p. 132; emphases in original)

*Value: Style.*

The ideas of contacting what is in immediate awareness supported by one's own resources or those of the environment, encountering the *other* and forming a relationship, and deriving personal meaning and insights from the experience of that relationship are, in their final analysis, derived from existential philosophy and aesthetic thinking. Laura Perls herself pointed out that "the basic concepts of Gestalt therapy are philosophical and aesthetic rather than technical" (L. Perls, 1992, p. 149). Her view derived not only from her own artistic background and philosophical study, but from her collaboration with Fritz Perls and Paul Goodman, both philosophically oriented artists.

People who got interested in psychology at one time were all, in a way, artists. There were not such great differences. They were artists. . . . At that time, psychology, and particularly psychotherapy, became an art and not really a science in spite of all the attempts to make it a science. The people who did it well, they were really artists. (Kudirka, 1992, p. 88)

From this view, we can see more clearly the background from which she often asserted that the practice of psychotherapy possesses an artistic component and can be considered an aesthetic, interpersonal event (Kudirka, 1992; Zinker, 1978, 1994). To Laura Perls, the difference between a good psychotherapist and a great one was not in technical skill, but in artistic sensitivity, in what Zinker (1994) calls the "good form" of the therapist-client encounter. Consequently, Laura Perls often talked more about "style" rather than "technique."

I think that's a great mistake [therapy as a technical skill]. In Gestalt Therapy, I think any technique is applicable that is existential and experiential. We are not involved in just one technique. I would rather talk about style than techniques. Every therapist develops his own style, as an integrated way of expressing and communicating. You use technically what you have available in yourself, through your own experience. (Kudirka, 1992, p. 89)

**Final Years**

Laura Perls had been in residence at the same address in New York City and teaching at the New York City Gestalt Institute since 1957. By 1981, with the onset of age and increasingly poor health, her daughter, Renate, became her primary caretaker. In May 1990, with her physical health steadily deteriorating,

she undertook one final trip to her birthplace in the village of Pforzheim in Germany. Even though she had been forced to flee her homeland nearly sixty years before, Pforzheim always held a special place in her heart, and she often returned there throughout her life to visit childhood friends. It was in Pforzheim that Laura Perls died in July 1990. She went to her death as she had lived her life, honestly, unsentimentally, existentially. Her body lies buried along with those of her family in a little cemetery in Pforzheim, a particularly peaceful spot that she had loved since her childhood. It was there that she wanted to be placed between the grave of her father, Rudolf Posner, and that of Fritz Perls, reunited and resting at last with the two most important men of her life.

#### LAURA PERLS AND GESTALT THERAPY IN CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE

Laura Perls lived a full life yet wrote very little, and so little has been written about her. Feminist critics have noted that there has long been a dearth of biographical material about women figures in history, and these same critics pose the question as to why women writers write less than men or, more pointedly, do not think that their own lives are apparently considered valuable enough in comparison to document. Female authors, for the most part, with the notable exception of Simone de Beauvoir, have tended to write novels rather than biography or autobiography. Heilbrun (1988) notes that women's lives were rarely considered interesting enough to deserve biographical analysis. The appearance of *Zelda* (Milford, 1970) marked a turning point in the rise of the female perspective, although Zelda Fitzgerald's voice was ultimately destroyed by her husband, F. Scott Fitzgerald, as "he had usurped her narrative" (Heilbrun, 1988, p. 12). In a similar vein, Spacks (1976) notes that feminine autobiography is typically marked by "woman's attitudes" as confessions of inadequacy. Spacks (1980, pp. 113-114) expands on this and other observations by analyzing the biographies of Dorothy Day, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Golda Meir and discovers a "rhetoric of uncertainty" as well as the tendency to attribute the woman's success to sources other than her own personal will, ambition, or talents; a calling, a higher power, or a significant male are named as typical explanations (Serlin, 1992b).

We see this apparently unconscious prejudice against women in the history of Gestalt therapy, as the latter has been inordinately skewed to the life and work of Fritz Perls. The past historical renderings of Gestalt therapy are, in our opinions, a bit imbalanced because they have not done justice to the influences of Laura Perls and Paul Goodman. Nor, in equal importance, do they do justice to the richness and complexity of what Gestalt therapy can and should be as practiced from a sense of appreciation for its aesthetic and philosophical subtleties, subtleties that come almost solely from the mind and heart of Laura Perls. We have sought to highlight the importance of her development, thought, style, and values; her intellect, teaching, and commitment are fundamental to the theory and practice of Gestalt therapy.

Contemporary feminist theory has sought to deconstruct the male discourse that tends to disempower women and their narratives. This means confronting one's anxiety in living without models or known narratives; it means standing alone and inventing oneself; it means having the courage to speak openly about anger and power. Finally, it means not only reading stories about women, but also writing about female impulses to knowledge and power, writing the narratives that women actually live (Serlin, 1992b). One of the authors (Serlin) began studying with Laura Perls in 1973 and has long been struck by the radical difference between her style of Gestalt therapy and that of Fritz Perls. Laura Perls was a dancer, a concert pianist, and a student of both Buber and Tillich; although she was a remarkable therapist and teacher, she was exceptionally modest about her talents and accomplishments and consequently wrote very little.

The present chapter can be seen as a small contribution toward correcting this historical and intellectual neglect of Laura Perls's role in the history of Gestalt therapy and in contemporary psychotherapy. Contact, support, stability, commitment, and rootedness were key words in the vocabulary of Laura Perls, and these principles are evident throughout her life, work, and death. Throughout her life she always valued friendship, established networks, and engaged in community involvement. While her husband, Fritz, traveled the world to popularize Gestalt therapy, Laura tended to focus on connection, cooperation, caring, and relationship. She gave Gestalt therapy a distinct and much-needed feminine voice, a contrapuntal voice to that of Fritz Perls, who spoke more of the joy of aggression and confrontation. Given his courageous personality, no-nonsense attitude toward life and growth, and tragic personal history, this is all quite understandable. In contrast, Laura practiced a slow, patient, and subtle way of following a client's intrapsychic and interpersonal process. Her work resulted in her giving spiritual birth to many generations of Gestalt therapists. Her creative involvement with her clients and students spanned continents and oceans. All of these activities form the essence of her feminine influence on Gestalt therapy. Laura Perls was not one who ever advised "letting go" of memories but strived to support their integration into the present, and so, for us and many others in the humanistic tradition, she will, despite death, "always be there," present, encouraging, and available in our hearts as the archetypal Old Wise Woman that she was in life.

#### REFERENCES

- Gaines, J. (1979). *Fritz Perls: Here and now*. Millbrae, CA: Celestial Arts.
- Heilbrun, C. (1988). *Writing a woman's life*. New York: Ballantine.
- Humphrey, K. (1986). Laura Perls: A biographical sketch. *Gestalt Journal*, 9(1), 5-11.
- Kudirka, N. (1992). A talk with Laura Perls about the therapist and the artist. In E.W.L. Smith (Ed.), *Gestalt voices* (pp. 85-92). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Latner, J. (1992). The theory of Gestalt therapy. In E. C. Nevis (Ed.), *Gestalt therapy: Perspectives and applications* (pp. 13-56). New York: Gardner Press.
- May, R. (1983). *The discovery of being: Writings in existential psychology*. New York: W. W. Norton.