

TRIBUTE TO LAURA PERLS



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Karen: A Gestalt-Phenomenological Approach to Movement Therapy" was published in the *Journal of Contemporary Psychology*. Dr. Serlin also has a videotaped interview of Laura Perls discussing her life and the development of Gestalt therapy, made in her New York apartment in 1988, available for distribution through Dr. Serlin at Saybrook.

Summary

This article is a narrative about Laura Perls's life and death. Because women's narratives are often not heard, and because Laura wrote very little, it is important to tell her story. Laura studied with Martin Buber and Paul Tillich, was a dancer and concert pianist, and wanted to name the emerging Gestalt therapy "existential therapy." Because her version of Gestalt therapy is closer to philosophy and the arts and emphasizes a more "feminine" support than Fritz Perls's emphasis on action and confrontation, her version of Gestalt should be told for historical accuracy.

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INTRODUCTION

Laura Perls was the cofounder of Gestalt therapy and the wife of Fritz Perls. More is known about Fritz and his confrontational style of Gestalt therapy than about Laura and her more supportive version. To make this feminine side known as part of the history of humanistic psychology, and to write a text of Laura's lived narrative, I will tell my version of the story of Laura's life and death, at which I was present.

Laura lived a full life, yet wrote little, and little has been written about her. This lack of written documentation by and about women figures in history has been noted by feminist critics in the field of literary criticism. These critics take up the question of why women writers write less than men or do not think that their own lives are worth describing. The narrative of Laura's life, therefore, can be understood in the context of the recent effort to move the narratives of women's lives and accomplishments from background to foreground.

Virginia Woolf (1929), in her classic book *A Room of One's Own*, described a change that occurred toward the end of the 18th century. This change, she claimed, was more important than that of the Crusades or of the War of the Roses: The middle class woman began to write. The infrequent woman writer was no longer the "lonely aristocrat," but a woman like the rest of us. Yet Virginia Woolf noticed that Jane Austin, the Brontes, and George Eliot all wrote novels. Novels, she thought, could be written in the family drawing room, among the usual distractions and responsibilities of family life. What would it take, she wondered, for a woman to write concentrated nonfiction, history, philosophy, or biography? It would take, in her now famous phrase, a "fixed income and a room of one's own." With these rudimentary tools, a woman could concentrate and generate scholarship to begin to match that of men.

Why else did women write mostly novels? Carolyn Heilbrun (1988), in *Writing a Woman's Life*, noted that women's lives were rarely interesting enough to warrant a biography or an autobiography. Therefore, the appearance of *Zelda* by Nancy Milford in 1970 marked a turning point in women's biography. *Zelda Fitzgerald* herself, however, was ultimately undermined by F. Scott Fitzgerald, and her voice was not heard; "he had usurped her narrative." Similarly, Patricia Spacks (1976) remarked that women's autobiography was typically marked by such "woman's attitudes" as con-



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fessions of inadequacy. These observations were expanded in 1980 with her essay "Selves in Hiding," in which she analyzed the autobiographies of Dorothy Day, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Golda Meir, and discovered a "rhetoric of *uncertainty*." Common to all of these autobiographies was a tendency to attribute the woman's success to a calling, a higher power, a man, or divine Other rather than to her own ambition, power, or capability.

The new wave of feminist theory has sought to deconstruct that male discourse that disempowers women and their narratives, and to imagine those new narratives and discourses with which women can reauthor their lives. This task calls for the courage to confront the anxiety of living without models or known narratives, the courage to stand alone and invent oneself (as did George Sand in *My Life*, 1979), and the courage to speak openly about anger and power. To author one's life means to take authority, to authorize, to be authoritative. Although feminists have long claimed that the

personal is political, reclaiming one's authority necessitates actually taking personal narratives into power and embodying these narratives in action. To be *feminist* means, according to Heilbrun (1988), "to articulate a self-consciousness about women's identity both as inherited cultural fact and as process of social construction" (p. 18). This means not only reading stories about women, but also writing about female impulses to knowledge and power, writing the narratives that women actually live.

LAURA'S STORY

Laura died on Friday, July 13, 1990, in Pforzeim, Germany. I was with her, her daughter Renate, and her granddaughter Leslie. The following is my tribute to my beloved teacher.

I began studying with Laura in 1973, when I was first in therapy with her, then studied and taught at the New York Gestalt Institute. She represented a very different Gestalt therapy than that popularized by Fritz and his Gestalt films. To honor this woman who was a concert pianist and dancer, who studied with Martin Buber and Paul Tillich, who was modest and wrote little, I want to show another side of Gestalt. Laura's slow and subtle way of following process was, for me, a more "feminine" Gestalt. Her theory of "Gestalt as an aesthetic philosophy" helped me understand my own work with movement therapy and gave me an aesthetic vision of the therapeutic process. Finally, in her relationship with Renate, Laura embodied a historical relationship between humanistic and transpersonal psychology. To illuminate these issues, I draw on journal entries that I made during Laura's last year and from my trip with Renate to Glastonbury Abbey in 1989.

The writing of this article, the telling of Laura's story, has helped me work through my grief. I shared the writing with Renate, who went over each line and approved the final version.

February 1990. Laura is growing weaker. She loses control of her body, experiences pain and paralysis. The thyroid seems not to work. Before it works, her kidneys collapse and her liver starts to go.

April 1990. New York. Laura's condition is getting worse. No one seems to know what is the problem. She can't walk and her heart

skips. She is in and out of consciousness. She wants no phone in her room; I can't reach her, so I talk weekly with Renate.

May 1990. Laura is able to leave the hospital. Renate needs to return to Munich. Since she had been Laura's primary caretaker for the last 10 years, it is decided by Laura, her doctor and lawyer, Renate, and her brother Steven to take Laura to Munich. Laura usually makes an annual pilgrimage to her childhood town of Pforzeim, and her closest childhood friend is still there.

When I reach Laura the night before her departure, she says: "Leni, I don't want to go . . . come visit me in Germany."

It doesn't seem possible that I can visit her in Germany, and I say good-bye with great sadness. Until then, I could always dial her apartment, and she would be where she and the Gestalt Institute had been since 1957. To me, Laura was always "there": present, encouraging, and available, the archetypal Old Wise Woman. She gave birth to generations of students, and her generativity spread across continents. It was hard to imagine Laura gone, an empty apartment. It seems like the end of an era, another great figure in humanistic psychology.

Stability and roots were key words for Laura. In contrast to Fritz's "You are not in this world to live up to my expectations," Laura held onto connections. While Fritz emphasized the "confrontation" side of contact at a boundary, Laura emphasized the support side. For example, she would encourage me not to reach out unless I had adequate support, and she would define support in terms of physical and metaphorical grounding. Support also came in the form of the integration and assimilation of all previous experiences. Laura was not for "letting go" of memories, but of integrating them into the present. The past was always present in the form of remembering, and the future in the form of anticipating; both remembering and anticipating take place in the present. Whenever we met, Laura would always reminisce about her friends and share news of people we knew. We would talk of men and lovers, and Laura would share her increasing awareness of her shrinking web of connections and the poignancy of growing old.

She shared memories of meeting Fritz in Frankfurt while he was a laboratory assistant to Kurt Goldstein's neurological laboratory for WWI veterans. Fritz, Laura, and all their friends were in psychoanalysis with Karl Landauer, an early Freud disciple who

was killed by the Nazis. Laura had read *The Interpretation of Dreams* when she was 16, had met Anna Freud and trained in the Frankfurt Institute. When the war came, Fritz and Laura fled Germany and went to Holland, then to South Africa. Ernest Jones found them a job teaching psychoanalysis; they began their own training institute, and Fritz served as an army psychiatrist. Although Laura describes what they practiced as "straight analysis," she "fell back on things which (she) had done all (her) life, which was a lot of bodywork, and (she) also sat opposite (her) client. Her roots were in modern dance, which (she) did already since (she) was very young." Laura's background was in "eurythmics and modern dance and piano."

Gestalt therapy was not yet invented when Laura and Fritz arrived in New York in 1957. They still considered themselves psychoanalysts; Fritz's book (written with Paul Goodman and Ralph Hefferline), called *Ego, Hunger and Aggression*, was first called "A Revision of Freudian Analysis." While Fritz and Paul wanted to call their therapy "Gestalt," Laura suggested the name "Existential therapy . . . which didn't exist at the time yet." Laura's roots in Existential therapy go back to her studies with Martin Buber and Paul Tillich, and her studies of phenomenology and later Heidegger. About Martin Buber she said: "Martin Buber was wonderful. Very straightforward, and you'd think that he was talking to you. Very directly—not talked at like most lecturers do."

Laura invented a way of sitting opposite her clients, observing that "Freud couldn't stand people staring at him, so he could avoid his own embarrassment, but also the embarrassment of the client." Laura brought embarrassment directly into the therapy: "Embarrassment has become for me a creative state. It is the boundary state par excellence. You are always with one foot in what you know and one foot in what you don't know. Actually, any development starts with disequilibrium. If there is complete homeostasis, nothing happens." Therefore, one must develop support to stand unease and awkwardness: "Actually, a young child has no difficulty with it. It is always learning to walk, is learning to talk. There is so much excitement and so much interest." Support is "the primary physiology, but then everything that one has known during the lifetime and the early years becomes assimilated and integrated so that it becomes new and you don't even know any more where you got it from. It's like in a way with food and you really digest it

and assimilate it; it becomes your flesh and bone and blood and you are not aware of it anymore. It's you."

Answering questions about how Gestalt has been misunderstood, Laura responded: "Gestalt is not a technical modality . . . techniques are secondary. Actually, Gestalt is a philosophical stated framework and within that frame you can use nearly any technique which you are familiar with. You can use, you know how to use or you can invent it at the moment what's necessary." Gestalt misunderstood as a set of techniques "started in the 60's with the hippie movement and at the time Fritz was on the West Coast and somehow was taken in by that very much and said something he hadn't really bargained for. There was this whole anti-intellectual attitude. Actually, what he meant by bullshitting is really a kind of intellectualizing, which does not mean that you shouldn't use your intellect. Actually, that's your foremost human attribute . . . actually, my work in the last 10, 20 years has been mostly to counteract that kind of 'hoey' approach and to get it more grounded."

When I asked Laura where the techniques came from, she responded: "Some people thought he got some of the technique from Moreno, but that wasn't so. He had very little contact with Moreno. It came directly from the theatre, and Fritz wanted to be a theatre director and he was." Zen was also an influence, and "that was actually an influence on us already when we were very young." Rudolf Steiner and eurhythmics was an influence, as well as Rudolf von Laban and Mary Wigman (pioneers in German expressionist dance). Laura was influenced by the "expressiveness" of Laban's work.

July 2. New York to Germany. Their crossing is difficult, and Laura has Fritz's remains with her. Her condition deteriorates in the nursing home, and she is now in a hospital in Pforzeim. Renate is sure the time is close; Laura always said she'd die in a year divisible by seven, and now she is 84. In six weeks she'll be 85.

Renate tells me that she will have to unlearn everything her mother taught her, especially not to die this way. Laura was convinced that this was the only reality, and Renate thinks there are others, that she won't have to die with pain and holding on. For Renate, Gestalt is too earthbound. I am sympathetic, remembering how I needed to move from Gestalt to Buddhism and Jungian psychology to follow my own spiritual quest. I'm now teaching in

Zurich, ironically close to Laura in Pforzeim. Laura, always grounded, however, was not very sympathetic to Renate's affinity with transpersonal psychology. She lived and died with dignity and honesty; but was she missing other realities?

July 7. I call twice daily from Zurich, expecting each day to be the last. Renate tells me that Laura is breathing a death rattle. Today is Fritz's birthday, making it even more likely that today might be the day. Renate tells me that she is still learning from Laura, that she really can't do anything for her, and can only help her facilitate what she will do anyway. We talk about what a stressful year it has been, how difficult it is being the child of famous parents, and how she needs to get on with her own life. At 11:15 I call the train schedule for tomorrow; Leslie, Renate's daughter, is on her way from New York.

July 8. Leslie has arrived, giving strength. Renate says she'll try to arrange the memorial for Wednesday, when I'm there. Laura has requested her favorite songs, the last four songs of Strauss. I'll dance. Although Laura is in and out of consciousness, Renate plays the songs and thinks Laura can still hear the music. She says: "She always loved those songs", and "people are predicting that Fritz will come for her today." I'm getting chilled.

July 10. Talked with Renate last night. She and Renate were at the hospital for six hours. Steve (Renate's brother, a psychologist in New Mexico) called. Laura listened to his voice, blinked, and went back to sleep. Renate wonders if she's let go of Laura, or if Laura has let go of her. Her ambivalence between letting go and holding on intensifies.

July 11. No change. Laura stared at Leslie nearly all day.

July 12. I take the morning train to Pforzeim. Renate and Leslie meet me, and we have lunch in town. I am eager to see Laura and dreading it. Renate warns me that she has lost much weight and is practically unrecognizable. I wonder if I will recognize her spirit. We joke to keep up our spirits, and I marvel at Renate's strength.

Pforzeim is lovely. It was a small town when Laura's family was there, but now it has a new pedestrian mall with shops. We try to

imagine what it must be like for Laura, who became famous in the world, to return to this little town.

During our drive to the hospital, I am apprehensive. The nuns greet us cheerfully, and take us to Laura's room. There she is, on a white bed, head tiny on the pillow, cheeks sunken, eyes closed, like a little bird.

It is—and it isn't—Laura. I remind her that she had asked me to visit her in Germany, and to squeeze my hand if she understands. I feel movement. Then I tell her I love her; one eye opens and looks at me.

After awhile, Renate, Leslie, and I go for a walk to the cemetery where Laura will be buried. Laura had loved the cemetery since childhood and wanted to be buried in the family plot. Her father, Rudolf Posner, was buried here. He was a jeweler, and the town was known for its jewelry trade. Laura was always close to her father. Behind beautifully tended lawns and statues is the Jewish section—delapidated, behind a tall fence, overgrown. The latest grave seems to be 1927. Laura's family had fled the Nazis, many were killed, and these graves had been recently vandalized by town youths. I wondered how Laura would feel about returning to this town so many years later. Laura and Fritz were to be buried together, next to her father.

After the walk, we return to the hospital. Laura is worse, and her hands are cold. The nurse advises Renate to call Steve to decide whether to disconnect the intravenous, and there is really no choice. The decision is simple and inevitable.

I return exhausted to my hotel room, and try to sort out my feelings. I appreciate Laura's realism; she is dying honestly, un-sentimentally, existentially, just as she lived and taught. We respond in kind and do what we had to. Yet we all feel something else, perhaps a presence hovering around the bed. Finally, I remember Laura's example; she always told me that work was central to her life and its stability, and she encouraged me to be strong. I very much appreciated being three women with Laura, three generations of strong, creative women. I am both sad and inspired.

July 13. Difficult night; no one slept. Leslie and I share a taxi to the hospital, Renate has gone ahead. She greets us with a long face: "She's gone. About four minutes ago."

We hold each other, then sit on the terrace. We feel Laura with us, then we feel her spirit fly out to her woods.

Renate is glad that Laura now has her freedom. She used to love to hike in the Alps or in Kniebis, a town in the Black Forest. We clean the room, and Leslie talks of having a baby. Life goes on, and we know Laura would like that.

They drive me to the 12:00 train which will take me to Athens. There's more teaching to do, and life goes on.

As I rode on a crowded train through Macedonia, I thought "Laura would have liked this." As I danced to bouzouki music, doing a memorial for her on a craggy hilltop overlooking the Aegean, and when back in California, I found myself, when in doubt or in wonder, saying: "Laura would have liked this." I know her life was interesting, and worth a narrative. A narrative of her own.

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