

## **Jim Robinson**

### **Trip to Esalen, Nov 05, for a Conference on the Future Development of Gestalt Psychotherapy**

Well, what a trip! It was quite an undertaking for me in many ways. The flights certainly took it out of me; on the way there I left Heathrow @ 10.30 and arrived in San Francisco @ about 2p.m. local time after an 11 hr flight feeling very stressed. It took 1+1/2 hrs to get out and collect my hire car, by which time I was even more tired and stressed. I had decided to drive down to Monterey and spend the night there, and it was something of a miracle that I made it. I found myself almost totally by chance, on the right road at least twice, when I could have easily ended in the middle of nowhere, totally exhausted. That did not feel like an attractive prospect. I eventually arrive in Monterey into a wonderful sunset and exciting glimpses on the Pacific ocean, found a motel after three attempts and slept through (mostly) a nose bleed and night sweats, to awake refreshed, but still struggling to get my head around being where I was. I had breakfast in a dinner on the pier, a very fishing fleet orientated pier with sea lions barking in the sea around it and taking refuge on the structure underneath.

On the drive along the coast around Monterey (which is quite a touristy place) I watched the huge pacific waves coming up out of seemingly nowhere and crashing onto the shore and in the less exposed places surfers having great fun. (Wow you have to be fit to do that!)

I finished the drive down to Esalen, arrived early so had time for a walk up one of the parks. The large hills that come down to the ocean around the area of Big Sur, are covered in scrub and there are only trees, mostly redwoods, in the valleys between the hills as they descend towards the ocean, so I spent a hour walking up and down one of these small steep wooded valleys. The smell was a wonderful rich piny scent, many of the huge trees going straight up to small spiky cones on top. I drank from the clear stream, saw a deer and a Blue Jay and started to relax. After lunch I looked around Esalen and found my four bunk bed cabin with a wonderful view from on top of the cliff looking over the pacific. It is a very beautiful place, a couple of hundred acres in all including a farm area I never got around to seeing, The hills come down to the road and below the road the slope is gentler down a small cliff to the sea, so the central office, kitchen, dining and main meeting room are all on flattish ground overlooking the ocean, with the huts and other meeting rooms dotted around the site.

The conference sessions started that evening at eight after supper at six. The routine was first session of the day at 9.30 to 1.00 then lunch, then afternoon workshops (four to choose from each day) from 3.30 - 6.00 then supper then an evening session from 8 - 10.00 p.m., so a busy schedule. Some were quite intellectual and some were very experiential; in one we starting working with bodily sensation and after some experiments moved into meeting someone unknown to us without words and afterwards talking over the experience with them - very powerful and I expect the connection I made with who I met then, will last a long time. They referred to this way of working as 'embodied'; meeting and being met in such a deep way is very healing for the soul. I saw clearly how people favour one or two centres, some were strong in the heads and bodies, some in their hearts and bodies, and a few seemed to be just in their head or heart (a definition of neurosis). I found it fascinating how it took the openness of contact for me and others to start to be three brained beings with presence, and the work on 'embodying' certainly helped with that. There also were conversations with people who had spent time with Fritz Perls during his five years at Esalen between 1965-9 which were fascinating. The historical connection was delightful, adding a special dimension to it all.

The most difficult thing in the world for me is to deal with being in a large group of people (a courtesy of where I grew up), there were about 75 of us attending the conference, with I believe another eighty or so other guests / staff on the site as well. At times I would fail in my own eyes to say, or elaborate, or state what I wanted to say and then beat myself up for my failure, and fear withdrawing more and more from the whole event. But gradually with meeting more and more people in such a contactful way I felt more able to relax and feel affirmed and allow my heart to open and really enjoy myself. On Thursday (the last full day), I went to an afternoon workshop on Gestalt and Spirituality run by someone I had got to know and like. For one of the experiments we asked to pair up with someone and share some of our wishes and hopes around the subject. By chance I paired up with a Mexican woman, a psychotherapist, who spoke little English. We had also by chance also sat next to each in an exercise within the whole group that morning. I thought that this was going to be one of those occasions where little would be possible, but how wrong I was. After half an hour or so of struggling to communicate, it was like magic, there was love between us, it was wonderful. Nothing more happened, but it was such a heart opening and affirming experience, affirming of life and myself, unforgettable.

Out of the support of contact with people I was / am able to see that the fear which is such a part of me, is deeper than the "not being good enough" feelings I had interpreted until now, and is something more like a real belly fear of not having the right to exist. As with my experience of a Skyros holiday and some Gurdjieff 'work weeks' I'd experienced in the past, it was this fear that I was able to be let go of, more and more during these five days. My existence felt valued and appreciated. Through the contact and opening up of people I could see that their fear was similar to mine, that for most there was, in some form or another, the struggle with the fear around being accepted or rejected. I think more and more that at depth this is a spiritual process, I guess I mean by this, that when it involves heart, head and body, all present, it becomes a spiritual process. Contact is towards God.

The intellectual material of the conference was about the evolution of Gestalt and was largely concerned with promoting the relational and intersubjective view of Gestalt. It reminded me of Buddhism really, everything depends on, and relates to everything else, we are not isolated individuals. People talked about recovering from individualism (as if from drugs), from being absorbed in our societies' distorted Cartesian world view. There was talk of the idea of cultural trauma (our reaction to trauma is often to isolate and remove ourselves from contactful relationship to avoid facing the pain) which I found very interesting. The trauma our society has been through since before the Black Death and on through many wars and incredible hardships, are I think deeply embedded.

Many talks were about how the habit of individualism permeates our lives and how opening to, increasing our contact to, and become more aware of our relational nature was the way forward. This is in contrast to the more existential orientated version of Gestalt promulgated by the New York institute. There were talks about how the latest cognitive scientific discoveries supported this relational view of people and how evolution supports it as well. Talks about how, and what is needed for communities to form, how to work with and influences companies and even how start having an effect on the wider community. All interesting stuff, but after the first session I'd understood that the main focus was on this being a "conference" on Gestalt. To me the notion itself is something of a contradiction in terms.

Some of the most abiding memories are of watching the sun go down over the Pacific, relaxing in the natural spring baths in the open on the edge of the cliff, (they smell a little sulphurous) looking up at the sky, moon and stars. Most people used them naked, which added to the sense of freedom. They are a famous part of Esalen. The water comes out of the ground at very hot bath temperature and is channelled into a trough

from which about six baths, big enough for about six to eight people, are fed. The baths are now housed in an excitingly designed new concrete structure that echoes to the sound of the waves, it has decks for massage, changing rooms etc., all situated on the edge of the cliff with magnificent view of sea and sky. The shower room must be the best shower in the world, you can stand right on the edge of cliff looking at sea and sky.

The conference finished on the Friday lunchtime, and I had a lovely time saying goodbye to most people (there were some I had never met). I had mistakenly thought it finished in the evening so had booked my return flight on the following Saturday afternoon, which meant that I had time to look around San Francisco on Saturday. It was quite fun; it's a pleasant and compact city with water on three sides, but I ended up driving around a bit too much. In the maritime museum that were fascinating pictures of the settlement in 1820 which was tiny, and by the Gold rush in 1860 there were hundreds on tall ships in the bay in front of a small town, by 1920 there were seven story office blocks etc., what a transformation over so short a time. There is a fantastic surfing beach on the Pacific edge of the city.

So another gruelling (more relaxed, so not quite as gruelling) flight I'm home. I finished reading Marian Milner's "A life of my own" of the way home. She became a psychoanalyst after the war and it's a wonderful account of her investigation into how to live her life, over a seven year period from 26 to 32 and is full of ideas which seem to tie attention, psychotherapy and spirituality together in very Gurdjieffian way.

In all an unforgettable experience! It's certainly wetted my appetite for more travel and making contact with more people, but then there is the reality of life to deal with again, which feels mundane and hard. Still, I hope that I can bring to this something of my increased understanding of our interrelatedness and the knowledge of how we need support to deepen contact for the growth of our being.