



THE EMPTY CHAIR

An introduction to
Gestalt Therapy Chair Work

Nicholas Breeze Wood

Chairwork is one of the main methods a Gestalt therapist is likely to use when they work with a client. It allows unconscious aspects of a person the chance to dialogue with each other and the person as a whole, so they can all 'hear' each other, and come to a resolution together - a wholeness - a gestalt. When this gestalt happens, the client is no longer in conflict with themselves.

Chairwork can sometimes, at first glance, look rather comical and strange, but the method - if used by a skillful therapist - can be amazingly powerful and profoundly emotionally moving and healing.

To explain how chairwork operates here is a simple story about a woman called Liz who goes to see a Gestalt therapist called Adam. Liz goes because she suffers from feelings of depression and 'stuckness' in her life.

Liz comes into the therapy room and sits down across from Adam the therapist. Some Gestalt therapists use chairs and others cushions on the floor, as in the work - as you will see as it unfolds - cushions can be more flexible and practical.

As they talk, Adam carefully observes Liz and looks out for subtle body or vocal mannerisms, which seem to have an 'energetic feel' to them, as if this mannerism is another 'part' of Liz which has a voice it wants to express.

As he listens, Adam notices that as Liz talks about her life she repeatedly makes a fist with her one hand, and pushes that fist into the open palm of her other hand. Adam senses that the 'energy' displayed in Liz's gesture hints at an unexpressed inner communication, which Liz's fist is trying to get across.

Adam pauses the conversation and directs Liz's attention to her hands, then he puts a new cushion on the floor, just across from her, and tells her to go and sit on it. This is now the fist's cushion, and while Liz sits on that cushion she has to speak from the position of Fist, in the first person - present tense: "I am Liz's fist."

The language Liz (talking as Fist) uses here is very important, and Adam is very watchful of it, gently correcting Liz if she strays out of character.

Adam asks Fist to describe himself - what is Fist feeling - is she

heavy or light - what colour is she etc? All these things help Liz to become Fist, really identified with Fist, so Fist can have a voice.

But Liz (speaking as Fist) censors Fist's voice, and says "I don't know what Fist wants to say."

Adam is ready for this however, and says: "Guess! Say the first thing that comes into your head!"

Eventually Liz lets go enough to let Fist have a voice, and Fist says: "I am Liz's fist. I feel hot and powerful and I want to push and squish."

Adam says to Fist: "OK, look at Liz" - while he points to Liz's original empty cushion - "and say that again to her, so that she can really hear you."

So Fist says it again to Liz, and then Adam tells Fist to get off her cushion and go over and sit on Liz's cushion, where Fist becomes Liz again.

When Liz is on her original cushion, Adam repeats what Fist just said, so that Liz can really hear it, and then he asks Liz what he wants to say back to Fist.

Liz asks Fist: "What do you want to push and squish?"

Adam says: "OK, now go back and be Fist," and Liz swaps cushions again.

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So that Fist can really hear Liz's question Adam says to Fist: "Liz wants to know what you want to push and squish? But Fist says: "I don't know I can't say!"

Adam again asks her to guess, but Fist refuses to. So Adam asks her to take responsibility for not answering Liz and to say to Liz: "I won't tell you!"

By changing Fists comment 'I can't tell you' into 'I won't tell you' Adam has asked Fist to be responsible for her actions.

Adam is now stuck, because the conversation between Liz and Fist has dried up, but there is still another person in the room - Liz's squished other hand. So Adam puts another cushion down for the squished hand and asks Liz to sit on it and become Palm.

Adam says to Palm: "How do you feel, getting squished by Fist all the time?" Palm says, "I feel horrible, pushed about, unable to move, every time I try and move or do anything Fist squishes me."

Adam gets Palm to move over to Fist's cushion and become Fist, and then he says to him " Palm says she feels horrible because you stop her moving all the time. Why do you do that?"

Fist replies "Palm gets me in trouble, she's always doing things that need to be stopped!"

Adam explores this statement some more and asks Fist some questions and eventually Fist says: "Palm is always doing things that have to be stopped, Mum used to have to stop her all the time when she was little, because Palm is naughty."

So, Adam puts a cushion down for Liz's mother, Sally. Fist goes to sit on that cushion and become Sally, who says: "I am Liz's mother, my name is Sally."

Adam then asks Sally why she always had to stop Palm from doing things when Liz was young, and Sally answers: "She always wants to waste her time doing stupid drawings, instead of doing her homework. I have to stop her all the time."

By now, some time has passed, and because Adam is skillful at keeping all the different parts of Liz in their roles, there is a strong, almost magical quality in the room, filled as it is by all these invisible, but very present personalities. Liz is in a light trance state, and talking congruently from each role she is in, on whichever cushion she is sitting upon at the time.

Adam has realised that there are some inter-generational, ancestral

messages about drawing that have been passed down the family line, so she asks Sally if she wanted to draw when she was a little girl.

Sally says: "Yes I wanted to draw, but it's a waste of time and stupid."

So Adam asks her: "Who told you it was stupid?"

Sally replies: "My mother!"

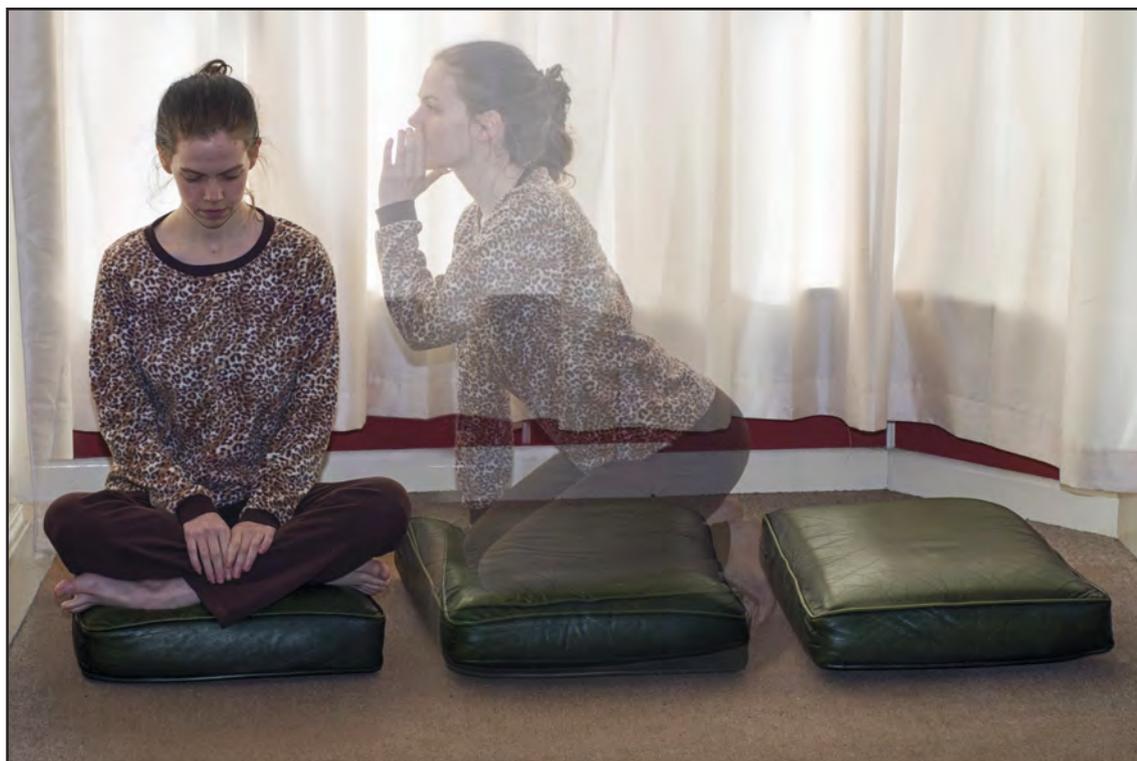
So Adam brings in another cushion, this one for Sally's mother - Liz's grandmother.

Adam gets Liz to move from Sally's cushion to the new cushion, and when she is there she tells her to introduce herself as her grandmother. Liz takes a moment to allow the new personality to come forward and says: "I am Agnes, I am Sally's mother."

Adam asks Agnes why she stopped Sally drawing as a child, and Agnes says: "Because there is a war on, my husband has just been killed in it, things are very difficult and we have no money for paper and coloured pencils."

So Adam asks Agnes if drawing would be OK at other, less difficult times? Agnes said: Of course it would!

Adam now tells Agnes, that Sally does not think it is OK to draw any time, because she thinks Agnes is really against it. Adam asks Agnes



if she wants Sally to continue to think that? Agnes looks shocked and says: "No of course I don't think drawing is bad and silly, I used to love drawing as a little girl, I just can't let Sally do it now because of the war and everything."

Adam asks Agnes if she will say that to Sally, and Agnes readily does, saying: "Sally I am sorry I stopped you drawing, I wish I hadn't, but I couldn't let you because of everything that happened!"

Adam makes Agnes move to Sally's cushion and asks her if she heard what Agnes, her mother, has just said to her.

Sally said she did hear it and Adam tells her to thank her mother, which - addressing Agnes - she does.

Adam then asks Sally if she still thinks it was OK to stop Liz drawing when he was a child? Sally says: "No, I shouldn't have stopped her," and Adam tells her to say that to Liz, which she does.

Adam then gets Sally to move over to Liz's original cushion, where she stops being Sally and becomes Liz again, and Adam then asks Liz if she heard what her mother Sally had just said, that she should not have stopped her drawing, and that drawing is not bad.

But Liz blanks out, because on an unconscious level she does not want to hear this new message from her mother. So Adam gets Liz to go back to Sally's cushion and become Sally once again, and instructs Sally to say it again to Liz in a strong, powerful way.

Eventually Liz hears Sally, and Adam can see that she has heard it from her energetic response to the words - she starts to cry when the message hits home.

Adam gives Liz a moment or two and then gets her to be Fist again.

When Fist is ready, Adam asks her if she is willing to stop squishing Palm, and Fist agrees to stop the squishing.

Adam then checks out with Palm if she needs anything else, and Palm says: "No, I just want to have the squishing stop, so I can be me and express myself."

Adam then quickly checks out with Agnes and Sally, and then Fist again, if they have anything else to say, and they all say it "No." So Adam has Liz go back to her original

cushion and when she has, she gets her to thank Fist, Palm, Sally and Agnes for helping, and then Adam removes all the other cushions.

Liz is now alone in the therapy room with Adam, who has healed a conflict that had been passed down through the family about creativity, Liz has been 'rewired' with a new message from her mother, who in turn was healed by her mother, and because of that Liz is no longer sitting on her creativity (squishing her open palm with her fist - all of which are symbolic actions) and starts to engage with her creativity - and soon her depression starts to lift.

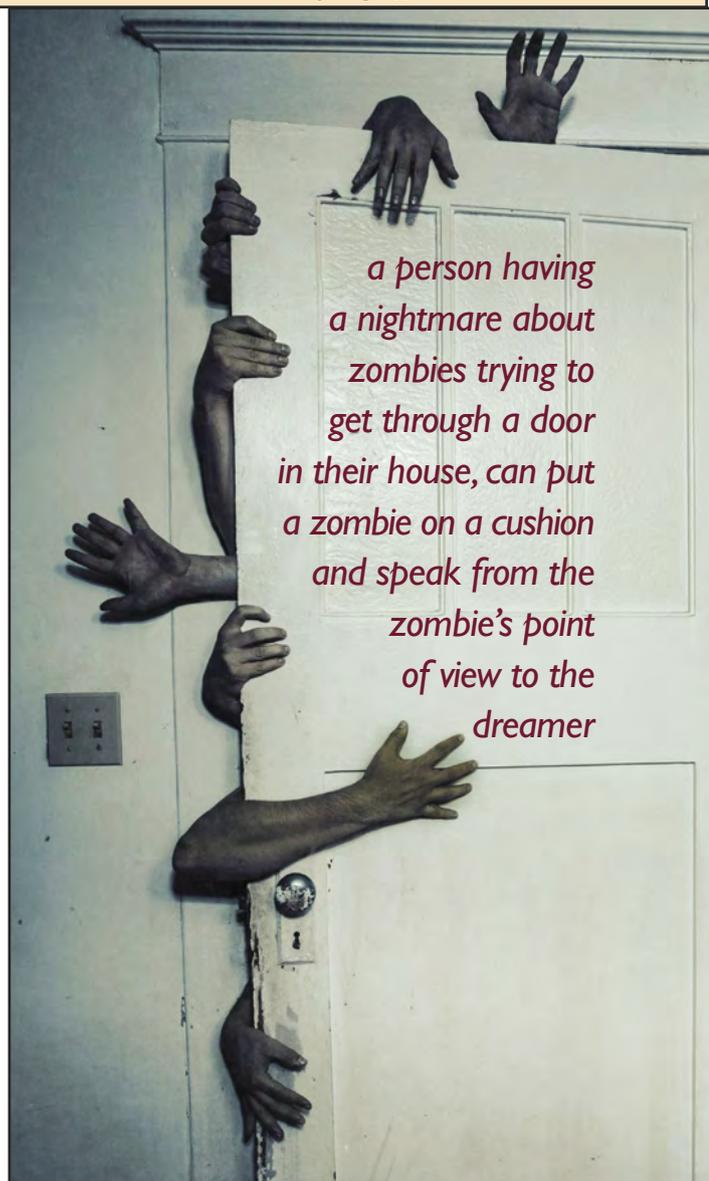
That was a simple, fictional account of a Gestalt session, but a real session may well go along those kinds of lines. The therapist will need to be aware of the energy and feel of their client's communication and be creative in their interactions, but if done right, sessions can be very powerful indeed. Sometimes - when time allows - a chairwork session can take an hour or two to complete, at other times it can be much quicker.

It is a method that can be used to look at dreams too, for example a person having a nightmare about zombies trying to get through a door in their house, can put a zombie on a cushion and speak from the zombie's point of view to the dreamer. Any aspect of a dream can be explored in this way - for example the door the zombies are trying to get through may have something important to say about the whole situation too.

When doing ancestral work, bringing in to the work parents and grandparents, or even at times great grandparents, the room can get to feel very 'strange' and the 'spirits' on the cushions can get to feel very present. A shamanic practitioner can very easily work with this in a much more overtly sacred and ceremonial way than a regular Gestalt therapist would do.

Be aware of the need to be tidy - thank and send away the 'spirits' (whether real spirits or psychological aspects of the person) in a tidy way and make sure the client is thoroughly themselves and de-rolled when the work is finished (turning over, scattering or physically putting away and removing the cushions helps a lot with this).

If this way of working appeals to you, I suggest you get some proper



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training. Often training is done in a therapy group setting, where you will have a chance to see other people practice chairwork, as well as being 'it' yourself.

Although not in itself shamanic, many people familiar with ceremony will recognise the 'taste' that Gestalt chairwork generates in the room. Done badly it is not going to get your client very far in the change work they want to do, but done with skill it can be a profound method of change, which might shift your client into a new wholeness, one which unlocks their innate potential, and brings deep systemic healing into their life.

Nicholas Breeze Wood is the editor of Sacred Hoop Magazine. In the mid 1980's he undertook several years of professional training as a psychotherapist, which included Gestalt therapy training.

Chair Work photos by Tim Kavanagh. Sacred Hoop wishes to thank Tim for his speedy, expert work