

Opinion

The phenomenology of silence in the Gestalt therapeutic room: a personal and practical reflection

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This telling was created at Ørslev Monastery, Denmark, in the summer of 2019. I was going to prepare an oral presentation to the GATLA summer residential under the title: 'Beyond Words: Turning awareness, dialogue and process towards worlds with languages other than the spoken word'.

What emerged beyond words there at the monastery was silence – so I went with silence.

This telling is a personal reflection on silence and the power of silence in the Gestalt therapeutic room. It carries experience with Gestalt therapy as a teacher, therapist, and client.

This journey into silence in the Gestalt therapeutic room has four viewpoints in this text: first from the client's perspective, then the therapist's, next the group's, and finally from inside silence.

Words and Silence – A Book of Confidence

*There are words
which can only be read in the dark
without light*

*Words written in the water
in the wind from a breath
in the skin's scent*

*There is life
which is born in the void
without walls*

Lars Björklund, 2009.

My translation with the author's approval.

The journey into silence – the client's world beyond words

When I began as a client, I was often frustrated, because of all the words that were used. The therapist sometimes was like a machine gun asking questions,

sometimes several in a row. Often, the therapist was lost in moral lectures or storytelling about something far away.

Someone said (it was a psychologist), 'Betinna, what good things do you do for yourself?' ... I don't recall my answer, but I remember the response: 'Well, try and go to the fruit market on the way home and enjoy all the colour. Buy grapes and lie on the couch – eat them with passion.'

Another said (this time a Gestalt therapist), 'Betinna, when do you relax? Do you relax? Can you relax?... I don't recall my answer, but I remember the response from the therapist: 'See the quote on my fridge: "Don't push the river; the river flows by itself".'

I knew there was some wisdom in the quote, so I wrote it everywhere as a reminder. To someone like me back then, who was used to spending all day long moving stones around in the river to make the flow go as I thought it should, I felt lost and wrong. And it became *the damn river* metaphor for many years.

They were words that describe a way of being that was not strong inside me. It did, though, light a wish to feel how on earth it would be – to go with the flow. Accept life and trust it to find its way.

In therapy, I often felt interrupted in my process and not quick enough to follow the therapist's speed. Like a double not good enough. I went into therapy – maybe I was sad and felt bad about being sad – and left feeling triple-mad at myself because my body and mind did not understand all the words I was met with. My head understood but the rest did not copy. I had to do better, I thought.

Now, looking back, I wonder if the therapist was hiding behind words for some reason. Maybe he was bored, on autopilot or simply wanted to help. What I needed was a therapist who could stay with me during what was difficult without wanting to change me, make me feel better or different.

In therapy, I think that words sometimes work like anaesthesia, or sedation, an escape from reality and an honest dialogue.

Here's a piece of advice for the therapist from the client: sometimes life just sucks, so shut up, dear therapist, and stay with me where I am.

The journey into silence – the therapist's world beyond words

When I began practising as a therapist, my own silence sitting there in the chair sometimes occurred because I froze. I simply did not know what to say and was scared.

It was a silence filled with anxiety ... mixed with both an overwhelming performance focus and humbleness before the task ... holding parts of another human being in my hands professionally. Silence was also filled with bashfulness – me stepping forward into unknown territory.

In a way I was glad that I had found something that I liked, where I could hide in silence – like behind a shield – making it look like it was a professional choice. I think I mainly fooled myself and it worked: I came through the dead end.

After some years in the therapist's chair, I noticed that I was actually quite comfortable with silence and I often had few words. I was not wrong, I was not faking, I was me – even when I did not know what to say. I felt at home when I first time heard Bent Falks' minimalistic approach to therapy, saying that all you need as a therapist is three words: yes and no.

Along the way, I learned that the client sometimes felt left alone – in vulnerable places – when I was silent. I was sometimes too passive from the client's perspective. Especially in the beginning of building a trusting relationship.

Silence calls for trust, so I added more words to the silence, saying for example:

- I am here. I am by your side. I am walking with you.
- Now I will be silent to give room for what is. Let me know if you want to break the silence – I will do the same.
- You can close your eyes if you want. I will too. Let me know when you open yours.
- Let me know if you need anything from me.
- I will sometimes move closer physically.
- In the introduction to myself I say that I tend be silent sometimes to give room and time for what is. That it is a sign of respect for the process going on.
- I will sometimes follow up and ask how it was with silence ...

Sometimes with talkative, middle-zone clients or those who express a wish to have more body awareness, I make a contract with them. I will then interrupt, sometimes roughly, when they wander off in words.

Without a contract, I address them more gently. I note what it does to me when I sense they are leaving me and themselves in words. A client who talks a lot or is silent a lot is maybe protecting something that is important to protect until it becomes less dangerous one day – maybe. I walk with great care here.

I have been pushed hard by myself and therapists, and it is not healthy in my experience. Rather, embrace what is and the rest will follow, if the desire gets bigger than the fear.

Be who you are with care. Mind life.

The journey into silence – the group therapeutic world beyond words

For the last year, I have been working with a group of seven people. My co-trainer, who is also a Gestalt therapist, and I decided to experiment with meditation and a lot of silence. We started and ended the days with meditation, started and ended all shifts with silence. We got good feedback from the group. They felt meditation and silence as supporting awareness and sharpening being present with what was.

The last weekend we spent together in the group, we were in a cottage in Sweden in early spring. We were outside sitting in a circle having a long morning check-in. Worlds had been shared with words, tears, eye contact, gestures, etc. Before going for a break, the group was invited to sit for a couple of minutes in silence.

A dragonfly came by and flew around in the circle, touching each of us – and then it left. We all saw it. It was like silence opened up to another form of communication beyond words. We felt a wind blow of community created by a source beyond or above. Words really cannot describe the feeling and the experience. It felt like a magic reality.

Being silent, our unit/gestalt somehow was sharing with the bigger universe – nature. The sum really got bigger than each part. We became part of something greater in that moment.

When life touches us deeply in grief, love, community, anger or sexual heights, the spoken word has limitations. Words can describe reality and create reality: they are not reality – the phenomena. The most mature and courageous thing to do when deeply touched is sometimes to keep silent with no words and share being in what is.

In silence, our senses are given full space to receive life. It can be so intense and intimate beyond words – beyond understanding, beyond measure.

I think you all know of moments like that when life and therapy touch sacred moments. Moments where life in its purest form is given room to breath. It's goosebumps being. I enjoyed inventing that line :-)

Now going towards the end of this telling, I would like to go deeper into silence – with words.

The two faces of silence – and the spot in between

These are the last two verses of a poem called ‘Vermeer’. It is the name of the artist, Johannes Vermeer, who painted *Girl with a Pearl Earring* in the Dutch Golden Age of 1665. The poem is written by Tomas Tranströmer.

Vermeer

...

*It hurts to go through walls, it sickens you
but it's necessary.
The world is one. But walls ...
And the wall is part of yourself –
Whether you know it or not it's the same for everyone,
everyone except little children. No walls for them.*

*The clear sky has set itself on a slant against the wall.
It's like a prayer to emptiness.
And the emptiness turns its face to us
and whispers,
'I am not empty, I am open.'*

Excerpt from ‘Vermeer’ (from *For the Living and the Dead* by Tomas Tranströmer, translated from the Swedish by John F. Deane, Tavern Books, 2012). This excerpt is reproduced with the permission of Tavern Books.

As I see it, silence has two faces: one side is like emptiness and the other like openness.

Silence experienced as emptiness can feel like an extreme fear of heights. It screams, *take care – you can die here!*

Silence experienced as openness can feel like you are drawn to a well of opportunities. It whispers, *come here – see what is!*

Silence is enigmatic.

- It is a passage to the present now and away from it.
- It is a hiding place and a place for universal unity.
- It is frightening like hell and magnetic like the smoothest baby skin.
- It is midwife to life and death.

Silence is in a way both/and – at the same time; it is when the world stops rotating and moves faster than light years.

Silence is like being in a snowglobe where all the small flakes have fallen to the ground and at the same

time, the globe explodes and spreads its parts to all corners of the earth.

Silence is never not there. It is like the hole in the doughnut, pauses between tones and words. It is the background giving everything form.

I get the feeling that silence is like a spot between the two faces with polarities on the sides. A spot where silence is ultimate. Where both the outer and inner voices stop, and you are ego – and selfless. No doing, no judgement, no direction, no opinions. There is complete acceptance of what is.

That's where the glass is both half empty and half full at the same time. That's where, when you let go and give in, you can almost see both the vase and the face.

The end of infinity: the bottom in the spot is ‘*formless and empty*’ like the beginning of Earth described in the Bible or formulated in the Heart sutra as ‘*Form is emptiness; emptiness is form*’, which is the essence of the Buddhist contribution to the global wisdom canon.

In therapy, the spot experience can be described as enlightenment. When it happens, you embrace yourself and, ultimately, the universe. In that spot, you are neither good nor bad; you are, and you are precious – as you are – not because of anything or anyone. Clients often express that spot as if they become lighter, not more happy or less sad, but less burdened, like they can raise their head a bit more, stretching instead of bending.

In the silence and in the monastery, I can get a nosebleed from a deeply-felt frustration. I become strongly aware of impermanence, I sense touching mortality and in that ... spot ... it happens to me that I surrender to nature; and then I resurrect with new form, new perspectives, new orientation.

To me, a stay there is like the end of a good deep and long sigh – in between exhalation and inhalation – in silence.

I stop to fill myself and become empty and then the world fills me.

I have not used very many words from the Gestalt vocabulary. I wanted to find the knowledge of silence within myself. For this telling to be as close as possible to my world, I needed *my* words. I hope, though, that you can see Gestalt theory reflected.

To make both Laura and Fritz Perls happy, I will quote them here, ending with the following words:

‘Lose your mind and come to your senses’ – in silence.

Betinna Sidor I have worked with people all my life as a teacher, writer, and head of HR in the private sector. In recent years Gestalt therapy has gradually taken over and today I have my own private practice as a Gestalt therapist, supervisor and HR consultant. I trained at Nordisk Gestalt Institut in Copenhagen where I am part of the faculty as a trainer.

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