

In their own voices

An interview with Robert W. Resnick and Rita F. Resnick

Malcolm Parlett

Rita and Bob Resnick are renowned international Gestalt trainers with immense experience, including – as one of their long-term focal interests – working therapeutically with couples. They have been providing Gestalt therapy and couples therapy training for thirty-five and fifty years respectively. They also run one of the most established events in the international Gestalt calendar, now in its 48th year, the GATLA European Summer Residential Gestalt and Couples Therapy Training Programs. They have also been a couple ('frequently happily married') for forty-seven years. If this interview had a formal title it would be the following: 'Two Become One and Then There Are None', which they describe as representing 'their point of view in a nutshell'. In the interview, which took place in November 2017, Bob and Rita lay out the core thinking that underpins their distinctive approach to working with couples – notably in supporting a movement from a 'Fusion Model' to a 'Connection Model'. Dismantling the first model in favour of the second is a change that borders on being revolutionary: they challenge assumptions that are taken for granted in the general culture, as well as by couples with whom they work. Given the centrality of 'primary relationships' in the vast majority of people's lives, the interview has relevance well beyond couples therapy itself.

Rita and Bob, thank you for agreeing to my request to interview you for the *British Gestalt Journal*. I think your ideas deserve wider exposure, and I am excited to help bring this about. By way of preparation, I viewed two previous interviews you've given about your work with couples, and I thought they were excellent. I suggest that we don't cover the same ground here but rather that we explore your work with couples in the wider context of society, culture, and changing attitudes to marriage, relationships, intimacy, as well as how your perspective differs from other models of couple therapy.

Bob: Beginning with your last point, I think there are several things that fundamentally differentiate us from other models of couples therapy. The first is our attending to the existential issue of finding meaning. Most people in Western culture try to find a sense of meaning through their connection to another, typically in an ongoing primary relationship. They find meaning through the relationship between the self and the other. The primary relationship is mutual so that each one carries the other in their consciousness – not always on the front burner, not always figural, but somewhere in the ground. Of course, it's not the only way people create existential meaning in their lives, but primary relationships can provide an emotional home base, ongoing through life.

The second fundamental difference comes from Gestalt therapy's field theory perspective. We're not just interested in trying to help people in primary relationships make the conventional model of marriage and relationships work. The Western model of marriage has existed for thousands of years. We are questioning the model's continuance as a normative cultural stereotype – whether marriage, legal or not, straight or gay. Marriage was once a creative adjustment in the service of survival, but is now so constrictive and out-of-date. We call it a fusion model, fixed and confluent, where two become one. The fusion model clearly doesn't allow for connection. To have connection you need two. Achieving connection requires both contact and withdrawal. The currency of contact is primary experience. Connection has to do with movement between contact, attachment and separation and differentiation, the back and forth. That's a rhythm. Achieving a balance requires movement. Simple physics: balance requires movement. To quote Albert Einstein, 'Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance you must keep moving.'

The third major difference that defines our model is about the place of difference and how couples deal with difference – I'm sure we'll get to that too.

And you are questioning what you call the 'fusion model' because it does not work for people?

Bob: Bearing in mind the ridiculous divorce rates that we have in the Western world – first marriages, 55%, second marriages over 75%, it's clear that most 'till death do us part' relationships do not last that long – not even close. The only way people can find out if they are compatible or not is if they start authentically representing themselves, if they show up; and then, if there's enough overlap, there is a shared holding core. They are not going to be the same as each other, of course, and neither of them stays the same over time. There's movement. But if they find enough overlap, and they have something that works well for them – that's fine. Some marriages may seem to fit into the template of two becoming one. But, if you look deeper at who stays married, you find a lot of them are what we call the 'secretly miserably married', staying together for such reasons as religion, social stigma, children, money, or fear of being alone. Those are reasons to stay together, but they are not about mutual nourishment of core needs. Some of the professional literature leads the reader to believe that it is a success just to stay together, as if staying married is the sole metric. By this criterion, slavery and men owning women was a success for many years.

So successful relationships are about mutual nourishment – emotional growth, support, and joyful companionship?

Bob: Yes. It's building a shared ground over time that includes those wonderful things. It also includes sadness, difficulty, anger – life. Overall, having shared ground is a positive balance and support for both people individually and for the relationship.

Rita: We say it like this: if I please myself most of the time (meeting my core needs), and you please yourself most of the time (meeting your core needs), in this relationship, then we have something that works because we both feel genuinely individually satisfied and satisfied together. Compatible couples can compromise on many things. If, however, they compromise on too many of their respective core needs, the relationship will either explode (rupture and divorce) or implode (joining the ranks of the secretly miserably married). Finding out what your core needs actually are, rather than just adopting cultural and familial (introjected) 'needs' and beliefs, is an important part of any serious therapy – individual and couples. Of course, almost all individual therapy is about relationships (of different kinds) as well.

Bob: It's also important to emphasise that even in the best of primary relationships, no one is satisfied all the time. Disappointment – sometimes even mutual disappointment – is part of life.

Rita: Right. We also don't want to make 'for ever' a benchmark of a successful relationship. This could easily become another introject. When the fusion model evolved (presumably to enhance survival), the local version of 'till death do us part' was just a few years at most. Easy. We need to be open to different people's and different groups of people's needs – straight, gay, old, young, etc., to find what fits for them now. For some, a really successful relationship may have a legitimate expiration date. We don't know anything that fits everyone and we don't want to decide for others. Again, we advocate self-regulation within the person's environment with sensitivity, consideration and responsiveness.

Bob: Couples have to deal with what we call the basic human dilemma: how to be connected to an other – and maintain self. This is a dilemma that exists all the way from birth till death. What's crucial is that there's movement, a dynamic movement between contact and withdrawal – both with support. So when we put this together with a fusion model of marriage, we see the obvious difficulty. You cannot have movement within a fixed fusion/confluence model of relationships and marriage. Taking into account the divorced people – their explosions and ruptures – and the implodings of the secretly miserably married, one can see that the fusion model is profoundly flawed for today's world. There are very few couples that stay married because it's mutually nourishing. Which is shocking – although we've known it to be the reality for decades.

So the institution of traditional marriage is obsolete?

Bob: We call marriage – the institution of marriage – a 'societal character structure'. It's the same as an individual character: it was very appropriate for its original context. If you go to a higher level of organisation and look at social history, it was a very good system, good enough that we survived both as individuals and as a species. It was a healthy creative adjustment to the field conditions that existed then – thousands of years ago, long before the Old Testament. Like an individual's character structure, the official 'institution of marriage' is anachronistic and it interrupts healthy functioning in the present. In sociological or anthropological terms, the first task of an institution in the beginning is to do what it's organised for – what's due the situation. Over time, the institution's first task morphs to protecting and continuing the institution itself.

Rita: I was just thinking about Scandinavian communities I know and the way that many of them do not marry. They live together and they decide to

have families together but the idea of marriage, putting a ring on your finger, is something that's not very usual for them. And for some, I think the reasoning behind that is exactly what we're talking about. Not getting married gives them more psychological freedom to manoeuvre the world as individuals as well as a couple while still having their needs met through a major, ongoing connection with an other in their lives.

Intimacy, commitment, fidelity

Dismantling the fusion model in favour of a connection model is central to your work. What do you add with this very different model?

Bob: I think we add something in deconstructing the concept of intimacy.

Rita: We talk about intimacy, not in a particular context like sexuality or romantic intimacy. It doesn't have a particular valence. Rather, we see intimacy as an operationalised process and not a fixed state of feelings. It's summed up in 'I don't have to watch myself or watch you, I'm free to say or feel or do whatever I feel in your presence'. They have a safety mat of shared experience on which to rely. It is an earned, vulnerable, and relatively safe place. Only a fool is intimate with someone that they don't know well and doesn't know them well.

Bob: When you're not watching yourself or the other, you're not split. To be intimate is to be whole and fully there. Of course there will be some skinned knees – you can't not get hurt sometimes in an intimate relationship. Perhaps irritating or disappointing, but not serious and certainly not lethal. Being intimate does not require sexuality or romance or sweetness or soft and fuzzy. It could be all of those and it could also be an intimate fight.

Rita: Usually, intimacy has such a different meaning in Western culture – being intimate with someone typically means being sexual. It's so narrowly defined within one area of romance. We don't think about it that way nor confine it to that narrow band.

You're introducing new thinking about intimacy. What about another term that's part of normal thinking – commitment? What thoughts do you have about 'commitment'?

Bob: We are against content commitments. We advocate process commitments. So in the vows of marriage, 'I promise to love you...' etc., is a psychotic thing to say. I can't promise how I'm going to feel in

five or ten years time, even tomorrow. I can't promise that. I can promise behaviour but I can't promise how I feel, what I want, etc. But that doesn't mean there's no place for commitments: there's a place for process commitments. So instead of 'I promise to love you or respect you' or, in the old days, 'obey you', I can make a commitment to be 'authentic with you and to engage with you when we have difficulties – and not leave'. And although I won't guarantee staying for ever, I will make a commitment to be authentic, to show up, and to engage with you. Those commitments I can deliver. I can't deliver content commitments. If they're content vows and if the person changes, they can either breach them or lie about them, which is a horrible choice. But I wouldn't want to throw commitment out of our thinking about marriage vows.

Rita: We loved when a therapist couple we trained had a three candle wedding ceremony – a candle for each and a candle for the relationship.

Another kind of choice is that alongside their primary relationship, in which they get some of their needs met, a lot of people have affairs or juggle two relationships. They don't want to give up their primary relationship...

Rita: I think that's the intention for a lot of people. They say, 'I don't want to leave my primary, often initial, relationship because of the connection I have with you and the children or something that we have going, but there's some piece missing so I think that I'll fill that gap, over here in some other relationship, not my primary one.' But my actual experience with that is that they don't get what they want because one of the primary persons usually withdraws – like the wife who is there for the connection and not the sex, withdraws as soon as she finds out there's someone else. So her primariness is threatened and she doesn't offer the kind of thing that he was hoping to maintain by having two relationships. It's not always like that but that's my experience... that it doesn't work most of the time.

Bob: I agree. And I want to underline that the threat is to the partner. Monogamy is really only an insurance policy, it doesn't have that much value unto itself, but primariness can matter a great deal. Sexual monogamy, which is objective, may be part of the agreement of that couple, but primariness is where the real subjective value lies. It's about who is number one, who is 'home'.

So the primary relationship can be one that's not necessarily super-good sexually. It may be, but that's a kind of added plus plus plus. It's the social management of collaborative life that matters,

and the creation of a zone of safety and ease and enjoyment. Is that right?

Rita: Yes, familiarity, being known, loved and valued for who you are.

Bob: A good sexual relationship affords that safety because in a good sexual relationship you do allow yourself to become confluent. You allow it because you know you're safe enough to do that and you trust that you will de-coalesce and be separate again. It's a lovely place to visit. It's not that confluence or fusion is bad, it's getting stuck there that's bad. Getting stuck anywhere on the continuum from isolation to confluence is bad as it immobilises self-regulation. So we are not presenting a prescriptive model that your relationship should look like this, or that. It's a model that suggests you need to access what you need, find your rhythm, follow your rhythm and find someone with whom your rhythm overlaps and then you've got a deal. It's not that a couple should look this way or that way. It's not another set of introjects. We don't presume that there is a way that is best for everyone.

Rita: It's just a way for you.

Bob: Exactly.

Rita: Find that way and go with it and be happy.

Bob: And see who you fit with. And we believe there's room in this world for everybody, with a few exceptions. If who you are, for instance, is narcissistically 'me-me-me', you may find out that you don't fit with anybody. Then you need to look at yourself: maybe it's you? But a lot of the variance of what happens in relationships that either explode or implode is attributable to trying to follow the fusion model of marriage, not simply the individual's 'pathology'. Wearing shoes that don't fit will soon be very painful – with nothing necessarily wrong with either the shoes or your feet. Not a fit. In order to find out if you are compatible with another person – you have to show up as you are. Of course, both people bring who they are characterologically (fixed ways of meaning-making and responding to the world) including their traumas and their attachment histories.

In other words, the fusion model comprises a set of socially approved introjects...

Bob: ... Yes, and those introjects – comprising a 'two become one' fusion stencil of marriage – rigidifies the process, so that it interrupts the movement needed for connection – between contact and withdrawal.

If you cling to fusion/confluence to maintain 'the relationship', you lose yourself – and there really is no relationship unless there are two. If you cling to withdrawal to maintain yourself, you lose the other.

Educating for connection

In one of the interviews I listened to, you talk about the psychoanalytic view as being that you have to sort out your personal stuff and only then are you capable of being in a relationship that works.

Bob: And that point of view is formulated coming from the dominant cultural fusion model of marriage. It never questions the validity of this model. It only says it will work if you take care of your individual stuff. Which doesn't seem to be borne out either by the research or anecdotally.

So does it follow that, if you're not completely sorted in your own stuff, you can still have – on your model – a good enough working relationship?

Rita: Yes, and a solid one. I don't think anyone ever sorts out all their personal stuff and neither do they need to, even if it were possible. Part of being human is being imperfect.

Bob: Right. Of course, personal characterological difficulties will impact a primary relationship. We're not saying difficulties are all attributable to the fusion model, to the introjects... certainly not. We are saying that when you work with a couple, you can't always discriminate what issues come from the fusion model; what is one person's contribution; the other person's contribution; what's the interactive contribution; and what's the impact of the larger field. All four are always there and that's why we talk about a zoom lens rather than 'just an intra-psychic' or 'just an interpersonal' or 'just a field' lens. The lens you use will both determine and limit what you see. If you only use a microscope, you'll never see an elephant.

Rita: Which is also what's different about our model. Because most other couples therapy models focus in one place or another, they don't move around. They either look just at the couple as a system or they work only with the individuals, but very few of them look at individual, couple, and larger field issues including models of marriage.

Bob: They will look at some larger field issues but none of them look at the model of marriage as a cultural introject, as an institutional character structure. It's just accepted. The fusion model is clearly Procrustean. We certainly

do question/oppose it and advocate a connection model to replace it – leaving space for couples to find their dynamic place of balance – even if for a particular couple, it's predominantly fusion they choose.

Quite a lot of people that I have worked with say that being in a relationship stretches them in new ways, they have to look at their own 'stuff'. The relationship is what's teaching them. It's like it's an educative medium for their own development.

Rita: It's like having children. You can't go through that process without revisiting your own childhood or some of the issues that have come up for you. It's just impossible not to. You can choose not to deal with it, to just push it away. But it has to come up. It has to awaken something.

Bob: Well, it is educative in the sense that when you are relating to somebody all the time and you know them more and you're known by them more, then inevitably your and their issues – both good, beautiful, sweet, and pain-in-the-arse difficulties – will come out. But for some of those issues, a large percentage comes from people following the templates and the stencils built into the fusion model of marriage. They are attempting to implement the culturally approved fusion model. And yes, some of the difficulties are a function of who they are.

So it seems that when you're working with a couple, you are actively getting them to examine, almost change the principles of the way in which they relate...

Rita: I wouldn't say change the principles. I would say become aware of what they are doing and how they are doing it and how that functions. They make that decision about whether they choose to do it differently or not. But they're coming in because something's not functioning well, otherwise they never show up in our offices.

Bob: If the couple believes that the only way they can be together as a couple is to follow the cultural fusion model (as a microbe on a stop sign believes that the whole world is red), we are happy to offer alternative ways of experimenting with trying to meet both their individual and couple needs – if they are interested. Most needs are usually healthy and to use older Gestalt therapy language, it's the 'means whereby' – how people go about trying to meet their needs – that gets them into trouble.

But you are offering supports for relating successfully in a primary relationship.

Rita: Yes, we support the value of ongoing, primary relationships – we are opposing the fusion model of 'how'.

Bob: There is a psycho-educational component, I think that's true of all therapies, but especially in couples therapy, around the whole idea of difference. Difference in the culture is often seen as bad, dangerous, critical, or as a betrayal, or threat to connection or autonomy. Difference is not seen in the culture as connective tissue – part of the synapses of connection. Couples therapists, operating within the same culture, often join the couple inadvertently and collude in trying to eradicate difference. 'So if you do a little more of this and she does a little more of that, you'll both be happy.' And that lasts about a week. It just kicks the can down the road and the explosion happens later on, or an implosion happens – one or the other. Using difference as a way to connect is something that for most people (including most couples therapists) is unheard of. From a Gestalt model we know that difference is the only way you can make contact. Not conflict – difference. And – to repeat myself – there can only be a difference when there are two.

Rita: Conflict is a means of trying to eradicate difference by making the other more like me. Typically, the other resists and sometimes even tries to make the first person more like them. Escalation, explosion, followed by withdrawal is the usual and predictable sequence here.

Are differences the most common issues they come to you with?

Bob: We'd want to re-frame that. They come with a whole variety of different content, but the seminal issue is almost always the same. Most couples issues are related to how they deal with difference and not what the differences are. How they deal with difference is the gateway to dealing in a collaborative way with what the differences actually are. Couples (and countries) rarely get to deal with what the differences are in a healthy way if they don't deal with the gateway issue of how they deal with difference. Power and safety are important issues here. It's hard to deal with difference collaboratively if there is no parity. If there's not parity (equal entitlement to their needs) then there's no safety.

We are not so interested in problem solving or orchestrating outcomes – although we respect that this is a legitimate agenda of the couple, as this is their life. Rather, we are supporting the couple to learn how to be contactful – making contact by engaging their differences.

Rita: Contact is very difficult when difference is erased or diluted. All of these (i.e. isolation, withdrawal, contact, intimacy, confluence) are healthy, depending on the situation. What is not healthy is either getting stuck in any of them, or jumping from one to another without enough support. This process is essentially the clinical manifestation of the dance of life – the basic human dilemma: how to be connected to an other and also maintain a self.

I know relationships where one party acknowledges that the other has more intelligence, more money, and that they are in a subservient role – not subservient, that's too strong, but within a lesser role. They just say 'Well, he or she is like that, you know, they've got money and power and call the shots, and I'm not going to oppose him or her all the time because there would be fights all the time'.

Rita: My experience with that is that that's fine for X amount of time. At some time, however, they get to a point where they have had enough and say 'I don't want to be in this role any more'. They pack their bags, and that's when the trouble begins. Or it goes the other way, and the 'subservient' party collapses and implodes. They go along with it and lead parallel and frequently depressive lives (an example of 'secretly miserably married'). However, those couples, where it works, don't show up in our office. The ones who turn up in our practice are the ones where it doesn't work or there's some area(s) where it doesn't work. It's important here to meet the couple where they are – focusing on that which is not working well for one or both of them.

Bob: You always have this dilemma: if this person is OK with what they have, why don't we leave them alone? On the other hand, are they really OK, or is this the only thing they know? If they've been slaves for years and they're OK with slavery, do you bother them or do you not?

Rita: Not.

Bob: It's a hard question for me. A delicate balance of respecting their cultural norms and honouring and responding to their hurts and yearnings. If, however, their cultural norms go against your strongly held personal values, then you need to speak up, for example wife beating or genital mutilation of young girls.

I am wondering about the huge cultural changes that have taken place, particularly in the empowerment of women? Has your practice shifted in any way, as a result of this revolution over the last twenty, thirty years?

Rita: I'm having difficulty thinking about it because if I think about the people that come in to my office, they are usually in two different categories. Category One: The whole women's movement issue has no part in the lives of these people. Category Two: Women for whom the empowerment of women is so much a part of them that their lives already revolve around that issue and it's not anything that's new or different: it's the way the relationship was formed and that's who they are as people. It's not something that's new. I don't know – do you have anybody for whom it's new? Or you can see a change?

Bob: Well, at a subtle level, yes. It's not uncommon for a couple to go along seeming OK for both of them for a decade or more only to have one of them announce: 'I'm done'. They hadn't shared their disillusionment with the relationship until they reached their threshold of tolerance – sometimes an affair and sometimes just curdled optimism – and leave. It is sad and sometimes appropriate for a couple to split if they are really not compatible. It's tragic if they split up without ever having shown up to find out if they were compatible – for the couple, the kids and the community.

These days Gestalt therapists can be criticised if they are seen as too individualistic. Could you be criticised that you're doing something similar when you're looking at the couple as a system, and are so focused on what's going on between these two people that you ignore the wider frame: employment issues, money issues, intergenerational issues, that may be what's most relevant? If your focus is so much on the relating together, is that a danger? Are you 'couplistic', like individualistic? I mean we've been talking about the wider field. But are you aware of this being a potential danger?

Bob: It's a good question.

Rita: I think it's a danger if people look at only a snapshot of one or two sessions. I don't think it's a danger if you look at the overview, because I think you can't focus on the usual kinds of couple issues without including the wider field. It's impossible not to get the historical individual perspective as well as the context that they live in.

Bob: Absolutely agree. It's why we include that zoom lens. If it's a mining town, and the mines close down, and this guy's identity and his father and his grandfather are miners – there will be trouble. So now he's drinking and beating the shit out of his wife or his kids in impotent rage. He's losing his job and he's losing his identity as a human being and as a man.

This 'field event' has a profound effect on the couple and the family. So I agree with Rita that you might see a session where it's focusing on the relationship with your mother. But next you would see another part that has to do with the equality of men and women, or another one about economics or the meaning of being the breadwinner.

There's also the danger of over-correcting. I'm talking about the field right now. It used to be 'blame everything on my mother'. Now if you over-correct it's to blame everything on 'the field'. And of course the field has an influence. And of course 'my mother' had an influence. But how does a person deal with these influences? That's where agency is, and that's what we focus on. Explicitly privileging the individual, the couple, the family, the society, politics, the economy, etc., are all different and valid levels of organisation and emphasis. Currently in some recent Gestalt therapy literature, there seems to be a hierarchy of what level of organisation is important. They are all important.

Rita: Historically, half of both of our practices are couples and half are individuals. Today we do mostly teaching and training while still maintaining smaller versions of these half-and-half practices. We value both and also value those who are working on wider social, political, ecological issues, as well as those

working in narrower specialties – genetics, chemistry, neurology, etc.

Our focusing on the wider contexts began with noting the shift in the position of women. There's also, of course, been a shift in the position of men in relationships. That's another turbulence in our social world...

Bob: Maybe worse in some ways because I think men are less flexible about that stuff than women.

There is so much more regarding your approach than is possible to include in this interview. I am sorry to cut it off rather abruptly. It represents a small sample of your distinctive thinking about primary relationships, which affect all of us, even if we are single. Thank you both very much.

Notes

1. The two interviews I watched and recommend are: (1) GATLA website (Clinton Power from Australia, interviewer): <<http://gatla.org/uncategorized/clinton-power-interview/>>; and (2) YouTube (Luana Herek from Brazil, interviewer): <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Q1ypaUIPQw>>. Rita and Bob Resnick have a new couples films series: 'Two Become One and Then There Are None' with the first two films titled 'We Already Had Great Things', soon to be available on Vimeo on Demand.

Malcolm Parlett, PhD, was the first editor of the *British Gestalt Journal*. His book, *Future Sense: Five explorations of whole intelligence for a world that's waking up*, was published by Troubador/Matador in 2016. He is semi-retired as a coach and consultant, and continues to take keen interest in Gestalt thinking, practice, and teaching internationally about field theory and whole intelligence. He has recently moved from Oxford to Totnes, in Devon.

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