

## 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