

Chicken Soup Is Poison

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In order to make chicken soup, you have to kill a chicken. Although not particularly leading to self-actualization for the chicken, this sacrifices the bird to a great cause-being helpful. Combined with onions, greens, carrots, water and seasoning, the resulting elixir is ready for its role as a helper. The giving of chicken soup is an attempt to "help" the other, to make him feel better. The chubby, sponge-like matzo ball, not unlike the unconscious, lays 90% below the surface of the soup. By the time the unaware gourmet has had enough of this brew, the soup around the submerged matzo ball has cooled and, like a dead submarine, it spews forth its fatty oil slick. CAUTION: Chicken soup is likely to be as fatal to the recipient as it was to the contributing poultry. Now don't run around like a submarine with its head but off there is an antidote.

Many therapists see themselves as members of the "helping profession" engaged in the "helping relationship." Beware! Such people are dangerous. If successful, they kill the humanness in their patients by preventing their growth. This insidious process is somehow worse realizing such therapists typically want the reverse. They want their patients to grow, to live and to be, and they guarantee the antithesis with their "help." The distinction between true support and "help" is clear: *To do for the other what he is capable of doing for himself insures his not becoming aware that he can stand on his own two feet.* The difficult is in judging whether or not the person is potentially capable of doing or being himself. This depends on your own convictions about human beings and possibly your own need to be "helpful." If you are convinced (sucked in) that the person is as helpless, as impotent and as incompetent as he plays, then you are "helpful."

Gestalt therapy has as a basic goal the substituting of self-supports for environmental supports. Perls talks about the therapeutic impasse what the Russians call the

"sick point." Typically people experience confusion, helplessness and nothingness at such a point. Their usual attempts to manipulate their environment for support by playing deaf, dumb, misunderstanding, by crying, by demanding, by playing crazy, by pleasing, etc., are not working. If the therapist (or anyone else) walks into the manipulation by trying to be "helpful" he successfully keeps the other an infant. In order to achieve integration and to potentiate growth, the patient must "do his own dirty work." Perls, in a more poetic mood, states that the essence of Gestalt therapy is allowing (by frustrating) the patient to discover that he can "wipe his own ass." He illustrates this point by talking about the human embryo in utero. Here, the organism does nothing for himself. He is completely dependent on environmental supports. Sustenance, warmth and oxygen are all provided by the mother. At birth, the child enters his first impasse. He can breathe for himself or he can die. Throughout development the neonate becomes more and more able to crawl on his own four limbs. At birth he cannot stand by himself. Soon, if allowed, he stands autonomously. Carry a baby around all the time and he may never learn to walk. His muscles may atrophy and he may even lose the possibility of ever walking by himself. In western cultures mothers are "helpful" and their babies walk, on the average, almost a year later than children in some other cultures where the child is allowed to experiment, to make mistakes, to grow, to be. Children who get others to satisfy their needs with baby-talk never need to learn to speak. As long as they have someone helping them - taking responsibility for communicating their needs to the world - they never need speech. Without their "helpers" they are like Robespierre without his Baby Snooks. Initially, they may scream and cry for others to support them. Eventually, they will learn to communicate directly themselves or die.

No one can be completely without some environmental supports nor is it easy for me to conceive of wanting to be in such a position. There is a great difference in getting from the environment that which I cannot do for myself and conning others into doing what I can do for myself. Most of us to varying degrees are under the illusion that "we can't." Typically I have found that "I can't" really means, "I won't." I won't take the risks involved. To want the environment to help, to comfort, to support, even when I can rely solely on my own self-supports entails taking the risk of asking for such help. I take the responsibility of asking for help rather than manipulating the other into offering what he believes I am incapable of generating for myself. *Even the manipulation can be self-supporting if I am aware that is what I am doing. Such awareness allows me the choice and freedom to do this or to do otherwise.* I am then still me - not relinquishing my autonomy, my power, unless I want to do so. (classical existentialism)

People coming to therapy usually want something. Often they ask for "help" and what they want from therapy is a way to change the consequences of their behavior without changing their behavior. Themselves they state that they eat spicy foods and get heartburn. "Can't you do something about my heartburn since I am sure I can't stop eating spicy food. Stop the heartburn or at least help me find out 'why' my eating spicy food gives me heartburn." (They are under the illusion that the only possible way for them to change *what* they are doing is to find out *why* they are doing it.) Their cop-outs vary. The unconscious, although diminishing in popularity, probably still gets the most blame. Parents are always popular as are wives, husbands, and social systems, economic systems, world situations and the "soup-man" (or Superman, depending on how you see your therapist). As long as they attribute responsibility for *their* behavior to another person or concept *they* remain powerless. More exactly they are *giving* their power/autonomy/humanness to the other person or concept (Erich Fromm said the same thing in his book "Escape from Freedom"). Their implicit therapeutic request is: Let's you and he (or it) fight. The therapist, if he is unaware, willing or both, is pitted against the free-floating unconscious or whatever via the patient's manipulation while the latter drools over the flow of chicken soup and is never sated. Slow down or, noodles forbid, stop the soup, and the patient tries that much harder to unclog his lifeline. When the help is not forthcoming and the patient has not yet discovered his own ability to give himself his own chicken soup, he then encounters his impasse. If the therapist successfully frustrates the patient's attempts to manipulate, the impasse is pregnant with growth. If the therapist is "helpful," he assures the patient's remaining impotent and up comes the oil slick from the murky depths

of the soup. Even when a person breaks through his own shackles as often happens in encounter groups, sensitivity groups, nude groups, marathon groups and drug groups, he typically has great difficulty in integrating his behavior and experience into his every day life. I am convinced that his freedom to be was given to him by the situation, the group, the leader, fatigue or drugs. Chicken soup comes in many flavors.*

The most popular way patients avoid standing on their own two feet is by looking for reasons. Simkin calls this the "why merry-go-round." (I'm sure you're all familiar with the tune.) The patient hops on the "why merry-go-round" and plays thirty-two bards of "why, why, why does this happen to me?" After finding the reason, he hops off the merry-go-round only to find that nothing has changed. He crawls back on his outside horse looking for the brass-ringed "why"-spends more time, effort and money so that this time his new reason is elevated to the status of an insight. Stumbling off his horse, brass ring in hand, he finds nothing has changed. Some people have been on this carousel of "therapy" for five, ten or twenty years. Many of those who got off the merry-go-round have changed their tune. The first eight bars go something like: "So now I know all the reasons and I'm still miserable." Indeed, if you allow them, they'll delight in relating their insights interminably (Excedrin headache No. 2002). It's as if the purpose of therapy is to find out "why." I'm convinced the purpose of therapy is to change behavior, experience or both. Behavior *is* caused and knowing the whys has nothing to do with change.

The most popular way therapists help their patients to avoid standing on their own is to first deny that they have the blueprints and answers the patient is asking for. (Of course, the therapist doesn't believe this.) This done, the therapist "helps" the patient with the content of his problems (e.g., he manipulates the patient into discovering for himself what the therapist knew all the time). Even if I assume (and I do not) that the therapist is better equipped to make decisions than the patient himself, and I am convinced that this leaves the patient no better off than when he started. If anything, he is a worse cripple. The lyrics of his problem change over the months and years but the melody lingers on and on and on. The process by which he stops himself from fuller functioning continues as long as he deals with the content of his problem to the exclusion of the process. Blaming his parents *for making him insecure* is not his problem...*HIS BLAMING IS*. What he is doing is making his parents responsible for who he is *now*. *How* he is doing this is by playing "victim" and blaming them. *Why* he is doing this is irrelevant to changing and if pursued guarantees his staying stuck. Is it any wonder he remains "weak and insecure." Only when he becomes aware of *his*

blaming his parents for who he is *now*, does he have a chance to grow. When he is in touch with *his* "responsibility" - his ability to respond - he enters a world of possibilities, choices and freedom. As long as he blames the other, he remains impotent.

The making of chicken soup is a fine, old art with many variations. However, one thing remains unchanged: In order to make chicken soup you have to kill the chicken.

*With this statement I in no way wish to condemn encounter groups, etc. I feel they can play an extremely important role in potentiating human growth by allowing people to experience possibilities. This, however, is not enough. It is only a beginning. The work then is to find out how (not why) I prevent myself from enjoying my possibilities.