

“Noticing more makes us act more decisively”

A CONVERSATION WITH ERHARD DOUBRAWA*

Why are feelings important for us human beings?

Doubrawa: I'd like to broaden the scope of this question a little. All perceptions are important, and feelings are also perceptions. If I perceive things comprehensively I am more capable of acting and I am more able to act according to what is needed. If we restrict ourselves to the question of feelings, that soon does not go far enough. It is about all perceptions, and if I train all my perceptions, then I also train my perceptual capacity with regard to feelings.

We understand why we enjoy experiencing positive feelings, being happy or in love. But is it not also right and important to try to suppress negative feelings a little and just not feel anything at all?

Doubrawa: Let's put it this way: it's common to do this, but we pay a high price if we do. As a Gestalt therapist I say: there are no negative feelings. There are feelings I don't like but which are, at the same time, relevant to my capacity to act.

There are no negative feelings

We experience anger, for instance. This is generally not a pleasant feeling, but it wants to destroy something that separates us. Or disgust. Disgust protects me, for instance, from ingesting things that are not good for me. Or take envy. What is wrong with envy if it means “Me, too” or “I want that, too?” Frustration, on the other hand, impels me to change something so that I am no longer frustrated. And fear protects me.

So what is negative about these feelings, other than the fact I don't like them?

But shouldn't we teach our children not to be envious of other people, for example?

Doubrawa: At first, envy sounds so venomous. But envy initially just informs us of what is not there, namely “I lack something” or “I don't belong to something.” And the question is not whether I am permitted to have a feeling or not, but rather how I deal with this feeling appropriately.

Everything that is there is permitted to exist

Active perceptual behaviour is the prerequisite for active, self-determined behaviour. Only then am I also able to shape my life in such a way that it is truly consistent and I can find my space within it. My perception helps me to operate within my social environment and to operate within my life in general. In Gestalt therapy we always use the analogy with hunger. I don't perceive hunger in the first place, rather at first I feel an unease or an agitation, something that distracts me. And then finally I notice “hunger,” and I know that now I have to act to fulfill this need – and how.

Same with envy. It comes and is simply there. And everything that is there is permitted to exist. It is merely a question of how I deal with it. If I learn “If I am envious, it suggests I am lacking or missing something, or that I am doing without something,” then I can also learn how to deal with this in an ap-

propriate way in my contact with other people. If I am not permitted to have this feeling, I start to feel ashamed, and I am not able to use the information that is expressed as envy. That is the problem. So, everything that is there is permitted to exist – it provides important information about a need, a set of requirements.

What price do I pay if I learn that I should not be envious, that the feeling is no good, and I just repress it?

Doubrawa: In this case I will probably not clearly perceive that there is a lack. If I do not perceive a lack, I cannot rectify it. But if children are envious, and if they do also feel this, the envy really becomes stronger and obvious and it doesn't stop. Then it becomes clear what the next step is and they start to act. And if I don't perceive this, I am only left with a diffuse dissatisfaction. Experience has shown that we cannot suppress a part of our feelings without going unpunished or paying a price. Experience has shown that if I do not permit envy my happiness will be compromised, too. Because it is as if I am cushioning something within me. And if I dampen perception with respect to envy, then I also damp perception with respect to gratitude, happiness or love.

But is it not the case that children especially, but adults, too, are sometimes completely unable to cope with their emotions?

Doubrawa: I once witnessed a car accident in which a pedestrian was run over. She was lying on the ground, and I thought she was dead. Then an intensive care doctor came past and

said, "The woman is unconscious. That is the organism's natural defensive reaction to immense stress, physical pain, etc." And it is similar with emotions we cannot cope with. We simply don't perceive them. This means I can at least endure, and in most cases – let's say in 98 or 99 % of the cases – also handle everything I perceive. That is also true for children. Most people don't believe that. And I believe that is the result of a weakening in one's own self-confidence. If as a child people are constantly saying to me, "Don't climb on the wall: you'll fall off," then I don't grow any more confident. That doesn't mean, though, that I should let children walk on any wall in sight. They also have to perceive their boundaries.

I believe we parents do not instil enough confidence in our children. When a child perceives this or that feeling, for instance envy or grief, we could say: "Tell us what you want" or "If you are sad, talk about it." If we learn that it is better not to express certain feelings, such as grief, at all, then we are left on our own with it. So, it's more a question of: "How can I convey this view and how can I support this understanding?" Adults could say, for instance: "It's not bad to feel sad; it's to be expected and totally normal. Don't worry, we are here for you. What do you need when you are sad?"

And what about aggression? We surely don't want that in our society at all.

Doubrawa: That's a very crucial question. Because when we say "aggression" we don't mean aggression in the literal sense of the word, rather we mean an inappropriate, destructive activity, something annihilating, something uninhibited, something like that.

Paul Goodman, one of the founders of Gestalt therapy, was able to show that destructive activity is the result of uncultivated aggression and as a result an uncultivated handling of aggression. Aggression, from the Latin word *aggredere*, is an activity, an approaching of the environment with the intention of

adapting it to my needs – but of course within social contact. The adaptation does not have to mean "I will achieve 100 % of what I want" or "I will turn my environment into whatever I like." I must, rather, do it in dialogue with others and also make compromises. If we are not trained in how to deal with conflicts – especially small, everyday conflicts – this creates the destructive aggression. It is, then, the result of a lack of "training" in how to handle conflicts and aggressive acts.

Can't we leave out aggressive acts?

Doubrawa: Aggression in itself is not a negative thing, just as feelings are not negative things. The question again is: "How do I deal with this appropriately?" If I learn that aggression is natural, then these excesses will occur less often. And this brings me back to the beginning of the conversation: it is about self-determined behaviour.

The question is: How do I deal with my emotions appropriately?

Aggression is therefore something positive if we learn how to cultivate and handle it appropriately. And throwing it away is like throwing away sadness, throwing away disgust, throwing away fear, or throwing away hunger.

In terms of the feelings of children's television editors, in what ways would you like to see them extending themselves or perhaps developing some aspects of themselves so they can act more successfully?

Doubrawa: First: If editors are in touch with themselves and their perceptions and have no reservations about unpleasant feelings such as fear or grief, which they of course also experience themselves, then they may be able to make films in which these feelings are allowed to feature. Second: Senior editors say of their projects that they often have an inkling very early on when something is not functioning well or

is not consistent. But then there have been "good" reasons not to face up to these inklings. If they learn to take these inklings, fears or fantasies more seriously, then they will also be able to choose lines of action or make other decisions, intervene more quickly, follow up, and perhaps sometimes also be able to finish a project sooner. Noticing more makes us act more decisively.

Third: There is another quite different area in which the perception of feelings is important, and where Gestalt therapy was adopted very early on: in, for instance, management training in organisational development and in coaching for managers. And why? Because it became apparent that managers who have better perception, and who notice that somebody is withdrawn or stressed or seems sad, are much more capable of taking action. For instance, there are management concepts such as "management by wandering around."

By walking through their company managers learn to say "hello" to everything they perceive in a friendly manner, but above all they get a sense of the mood – specifically their own; where they like going, where they don't. And in this way they gain an immense amount of information on what is going on in their company. This makes them more capable of action, but also more accurate and more determined. ■

REFERENCE

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