

BARRY STEVENS: IN REMEMBRANCE

Joe Wysong

At forty-five, I have little experience with the death of an old friend. Most are contemporaries so when one does pass away the experience is shocking, a painful and unwelcome reminder of my own mortality. The death of a friend who has lived long and fruitfully is different. The passing of Barry Stevens, a long-time friend and early supporter of our efforts to establish *The Gestalt Journal* seems appropriate. Barry left her body behind last December. Until the day before she died at the age of eighty-three, she was still writing and somehow managing to live alone in her own apartment in Meridan, Idaho. Her last book, *Burst Out Laughing*, was published last year by Celestial Arts.

I've known Barry for fifteen years. We met, shared our lives for a time, and kept in close touch for many years through correspondence. For the last few years as Barry's fading eyesight and the effects of a stroke made it more and more difficult for her to write, communications became briefer and less frequent.

Unimpressed with mentors and gurus who collect crowds that press to touch the hem of their garments, my contacts with those at the forefront of the "human potential movement" were cool. I sometimes learned from them but mostly kept my distance from the "stars" of the "growth center circuit". Nonetheless, in 1971 I decided to visit Mecca and registered for two weeks of workshops at the Esalen Institute. It would be my only visit. A few years later I would be asked to lead training workshops in Gestalt therapy as part of the Esalen faculty. I would refuse.

The first workshop I attended was led by At Chung-liang Huang, a modern dancer and teacher of Tai Chi Chuan. At was much lesser known than today, so the workshop population was small. Among the other participants were Barry Stevens and her son, John O. Stevens (hereafter referred to as "Steve"). Barry and Steve had a double agenda. In addition to full participation in the workshop, Steve was recording it in the hope of editing the materials into a book — much in the same manner as he had done a few years earlier with Frederick Perls, the result being *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim*. Steve succeeded. The workshop was the basis for *Embrace Tiger, Return to Mountain: The Essence of Tai Chi* by At Huang.

I first learned of Barry Stevens when I read *Person to Person* which she co-authored with Carl Rogers in 1967. I was struck both by her writing style and by what she had to say. Any 17-year-old who, when under parental pressure to enter college replies, "I don't want a career, I want a career!" is someone after my own heart.

Next I read *Don't Push the River*, originally published in 1970. An account of a few months spent with Fritz Perls at Lake Cowichan (he termed her a "natural-born therapist") alternating with episodes from her earlier days, it became a "best-seller" in the circles of humanistic psychology. I also knew that her son, Steve, was responsible for the compilation of *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim*, the media event that brought Gestalt therapy to public attention in the late 1960's.

I met Barry and Steve the first day of the workshop and a friendship soon developed. At Huang's teaching style was playful and invited a response of playful learning from workshop participants creating an oasis of peace in contrast to the rest of the workshops around us which seemed like a painting by Hieronymus Bosch brought to life. Barry shared in my responses to the unusual tribal rituals going on around us and we often sat together commenting on the strange behavior of the natives.

I recall one notable Esalen cooked breakfast of whole wheat pancakes. There we sat, ripping the outer crusts off the pancakes and scraping the doughy insides out. Cutting the pancakes with knife and fork in the traditional manner proved impossible. None of us had the foresight to bring a Swiss Army Knife. Sweetening was provided by sorghum molasses, a biliously black concoction that we mixed with the feed for the dairy cattle when I was a child. I assured Barry and Al that the glop was, indeed, rich in nutrients and most likely lacking in any inherent poisons. They both seemed unassured.

A scene, by the way, that contrasts with a later one where the three of us sat in a French restaurant in Manhattan as two waiters sang the Marseillaise to Barry while they flambéed her Duck L'Orange at table side and Al poured the wine.

Unlike many of the "stars" of the 1970's, Barry was put-off by adulation and did her best to live a "normal" life. One afternoon, while I was staying with her after she'd recently moved to Moab, Utah, a van with male, female, and large dog pulled in the driveway. It is important to note that Barry disliked dogs. Steve was out of town and Barry asked me to check on the visitors. As her phone was unlisted and she had only recently moved into the house, she was understandably curious.

I don't recall how I opened the conversation with the couple, both of whom, upon closer inspection, clearly hadn't bathed in the recent past. I do recall his response: They had driven over 1000 miles to "be with Barry" (whatever that meant) and had tracked her down by going over the tax rolls at the Moab Town Hall — the Inspector Clouseau of the human potential movement.

I made clear that Barry had no interest in seeing them, didn't hold "audiences," and that if they'd leave their name and address we'd see to it that they received notices of any public workshops Barry would be giving. Meanwhile the dog, having been released from the captivity of the van, was turning Barry's front lawn into a public facility.

They pleaded to see Barry and when I wouldn't budge they began unpacking their camping equipment on the front lawn (carefully avoiding the recent leavings of their canine companion).

The river needed some pushing.

I went in and discussed the matter with Barry and she agreed to see them for 15 minutes. They must, however, put the dog back in the van.

When I gave them the message, they couldn't believe that the "Barry Stevens they knew" didn't like dogs, became verbally abusive, and walked past me into the house — dog and all.

Barry and I laughed for days over the scene wherein I turned on my Midwestern shit-kicking routine and threatened to call the local constabulary unless they took the beast and left. We both had some trouble following the "psychobabble" spouting from the mouths of the unwashed worshipers as they explained their "right" to be there in spite of Barry's objections. Tempers flared and the dog started growling.

As I finally moved for the phone, the visitors exited with the male saying in a voice strong in it's absolute certainty: "That couldn't have been Barry Stevens! She's an imposter!"

From that point on, Barry and I had our joke. When we'd be together, most often at a conference or workshop, but on occasion walking down a street in Manhattan and someone would come up and say, "Aren't you Barry Stevens?" I'd say, "No, she's an imposter." We'd both burst out laughing.

I have memories of her wisdom, her gentleness, and her quietness. I remember walking for miles through the red rock canyons that surrounded Moab without exchanging a word.

Barry's support during the early days of *The Gestalt Journal* was fundamental to our initial

success. It was support that came *before* we began publication. Nourishment during gestation that was essential to our birth.

Our correspondence often focused on various aspects of Gestalt therapy and those involved in its practice. Once we were discussing a noted Gestalt therapist who had a habit of thinly disguising interpretations by using phrases such as "my hunch is" or "I imagine." We were soon discussing interpretation in general. One of Barry's letters on the subject reads as follows:

P. S. I don't not-interpret because this is a rule and I think this is important.

I just have too frail a brain.

I don't like to be interpreted.

- a) If I respect the interpreter, I am apt to think that he must be right and he may be wrong.
- b) He may be right at one level. I may agree with him. This cuts me off from the deeper level where the interpretation is not true.
- c) If he is right and I am not willing to admit it, I become rigid in excluding his interpretation. Rigidity is death; flexibility is life.

I don't like to interpret.

- a) I interpret you according to me, or according to some scheme.
- b) Repeatedly, when I notice my interpretation, withhold it, "you" prove me wrong by what comes from you, and I'm so very glad I didn't point you in the wrong direction. Sometimes "you" arrive at something that meets my interpretation (I don't know if you do this by following the same scheme) - and move on, and get at something deeper.

I am with Fritz on: "Even if I am right, I rob you of discovering it yourself."

I am then "helpless." I need you, to interpret me. You are so bright; you know so much. Not "Holy Smokes! I can find out everything for myself! It's all in me!" All that I have to do is find ways to get at it. You know more about these ways. I can learn that from you. Learn to use the tools. The discoveries are my own.

Awareness of me makes me not want to interpret. This is different from going by a rule.

Awareness is Gestalt. Rules ain't.

Barry

Barry Stevens

1902- 1985