
THE CASE FOR GOING GENTLE

This essay won a 1996 award from California Writer's Roundtable. The author, Ruth Lampert, is a Gestalt therapist who studied with Arnold Beisser, M.D., at the Gestalt Therapy Institute of Los Angeles. As Dr. Beisser was the inspiration for this essay, we thought it fitting to have it accompany "The Paradoxical Theory of Change." A biographical sketch of the author appears at the end of the essay.

Joe Wysong
Editor, *The Gestalt Journal*

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Ruth Lampert

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rage at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Dylan Thomas

I was a teenager the first time I read Dylan Thomas' words to his dying father, and I shouted whatever was the current vernacular version of --"YES!"

How right he was, I thought, to demand fighting to the very end. That's the way I would be when my time came, and that's the way everyone should be.

I have had a few (quite a few) years to think it over. Today, with "old age" not just a far-distant eventuality, burning and raging have less appeal.

In my sixth decade, having been close to many people of various ages who looked into, and went into, "that good night" I find myself impatient with the "Give 'em Hell!" crowd.

Probably his bellicose stance helped Thomas the son. The psychotherapist in me thinks, "That's one way to avoid feeling the pain of loss --- focus on how the one you are losing ought to behave." And if we refuse to accept parental death, we can, like Woody Allen, nourish the secret, sly wish that although "everyone dies, I'm hoping that in my case they will make an exception."

But how did Thomas the father feel about it? We are not privy to that knowledge.

My own father died unexpectedly in his sleep when I was nine years old. Some part of me must have felt angry and betrayed, but at nine I could not articulate my grief, let alone rage. I can never know what it was like for him.

I have since experienced the death of my grandmother in her eighties, my mother in her seventies, friends, colleagues, and teachers in their middle age, and young clients cruelly claimed by AIDS and cancer. Most of the time I desperately wanted the person to live and not die, but I have become very careful to not add my own need to the burden of the dying one, offering only unqualified loving

support.

I have come to believe that affirmation of life is not incongruent with acceptance of its inevitable end; that the instinct to survive is not incompatible with ultimate acquiescence. "A good death" may be a rarity but it is not an oxymoron.

I have been helped to understand this seeming paradox by the work and example of the late Gestalt therapist and teacher Arnold Beisser, M.D.

Arnie was 25, a recent medical school graduate, Navy reserve officer, and tennis champion when in 1950 polio left him paralyzed from the neck down. He went on to marry, to pursue his career, and to influence countless patients, students, and colleagues with his humane wisdom. In the elegantly succinct "The Paradoxical Theory of Change," he posited in 1970 the intriguing idea that the quickest path to growthful change is not via force (our own or someone else's) but through fully embracing the person we *are*.

Our metaphors for health and survival are those of the battlefield and the competitive world of business and sports. We "win" or we "lose." Thus we have "weapons" to "conquer" cancer. Thus the obituaries daily give notice of fallen warriors who "lost a long fight with....." Thus we applaud those who "successfully" recover, and call them "super- stars."

How we long to believe it is all within our control, that we can do it if we just try hard enough. Then we can avoid feeling wrenching pity for the child born deformed, for the family killed in a plane crash. Somehow, it must have been their responsibility. If only we try hard enough, say the right incantations, acquire the most lethal "weapons" to banish tragedy, we will be spared a similar fate.

Instead of weapons, why not tools to help us heal, to live our life to the fullest?

Some years ago I attended a workshop on the use of visualization to shrink tumors, a technique developed by Carl Simonton, M.D., and others. The suggested imagery was of tanks running over the cancer cells, machine guns wiping them out, etc. When several women, including me, objected to the warlike metaphor, we were told that our protest was a function of female resistance to owning anger.

We had no problem owning and expressing our anger at this interpretation. Mindful of some studies suggesting that the muscle relaxation elicited by gentle, nurturing imagery enhances the immune system and that the reverse is true of tension-evoking hostile visualization, we shared some alternate imagery:

There is a garden where both lovely flowers and poisonous weeds grow. We water the flowers and enrich the soil. We do dig up some weeds, and we may use some chemical spray (not enough to damage the flowers), but mostly we nourish the flowers and watch them crowd out the weeds and take over the garden.

In another visualization, malignant cells are seen as aggressive bullies. Using the "broken record" assertiveness technique we repeat again and again the messages: "No, you can't come in...of course you want to very much but it isn't allowed...the door is powerful, pounding on it won't help.... the locks are incredibly strong...no matter what you do you can't come in. Give it up."

Eventually the cancer cells slink away muttering, "We're wasting our time. Let's split."

Arnold Beisser never seemed to be embattled. He did not hate his disability or the prospect of death, and since hate is a necessary component of warfare, he did not go to war. He did undergo the strenuous physical therapy then prescribed which ironically enough turned out to be not only ineffective but damaging.

Did he "fail" in his efforts to recover? Anyone knowing him or reading his remarkable 1970 book "Flying Without Wings" knows the absurdity of that notion. Did his death at age 60 mean that he had "lost his long fight with polio?" More absurdity. It is his response to disability and loss that inspires us. He transformed his tragic circumstances by going gently.

Is longevity all we aspire to? Do we admire a rose less because it will not live as long as an oak tree?

The Alcohol Anonymous prayer asks for courage to change what can be changed, serenity to accept what cannot, and the wisdom to know the difference. Acquiring that wisdom is surely one of our most worthy and important goals.

Reconciling our appreciation for hair dye, cosmetic surgery, fitness, hip replacements, contact lenses, etc, with honoring age -- and eventually death -- is essential for serenity.

We can, I believe, cherish life, work tirelessly to find cures and relieve suffering, and wear lipstick, while recognizing the truth and beauty of Buddha's words:

"Everything that has a beginning has an ending. Make your peace with that and all will be well."

Ruth Lampert is a Gestalt therapist, writer and teacher who has been working with families and individuals for over 25 years. She has published numerous professional articles, anthology chapters, and audiotapes, as well as magazine and newspaper features including humorous essays, book reviews and family life. Her essay "The Case for Going Gentle" won a 1996 award from California Writer's Roundtable. She is currently completing her book, "A Child's Eye View of Gestalt Therapy," and is working on profiles of women in the performing and literary arts. A retired Adjunct Professor at Pepperdine University Graduate School of Education and Psychology, she has also taught at California State University Northridge, California State University Dominguez Hills, and Antioch University, and has presented over 100 workshops in the United States and Europe, including an invitational workshop in 1996 to the World Council for Psychotherapy in Vienna on "A Gestalt Approach With Children and Their Parents."

A California licensed Marriage, Family and Child Counselor, and holder of the Gestalt Therapy Institute of Los Angeles Certificate, she maintains a private practice in West Los Angeles where she is Co-Founder and Co-Director of The Advancement Center for Counseling and Training, dedicated to providing training and services in psycho-educational therapy.

The mother of four children — Wilene, Laurie, Brian and Betsy — and grandmother of five — Dylan, Austin, Talia, Alex and Joseph — she lives in Culver City, California with her husband, Tony Marolda.



[Return to The Gestalt Therapy Home Page](#)
