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A READER'S JOURNAL

Don't Push the River It Flows by Itself by Barry Stevens

ARJ2 Chapter: Evolution of Consciousness
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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2012

"Don't push the river" was the catchphrase of the 1960s and 70s — it was an epithet thrown at anyone who acted tense, anxious,

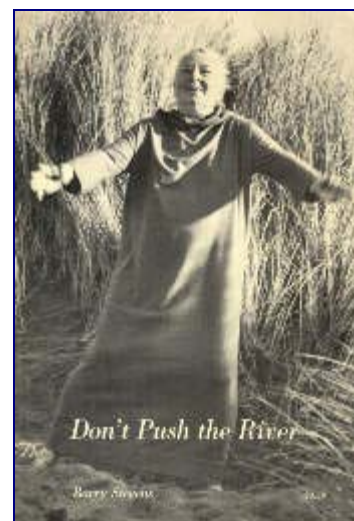
and uptight in those hippie and post-hippie decades filled with pop therapies like Transactional Analysis, Gestalt Therapy, and many others. It was certainly the guiding principle of Fritz Perls's Gestalt work: if someone in a group were working on a dream in which he was afraid of a river, he might be told, "Become the river" and encouraged to stand up and move around the room like the river, to feel how the river flows by itself. "There are no rules in Gestalt, only awareness," Fritz might tell him. Anything you fear or resist out in the world is part of you and inside you, and becoming aware of its presence and vitality will free you from pushing and move you into flowing.

Barry Stevens incorporated her experiences with Fritz Perls into this free-flowing book, so that anyone who was pushing against some part of herself could recognize what she was doing, release the pushing, and replace it with flowing. I heard "Don't push the river" so many times that I bought this book around 1977, and the \$3.50 price in the lower right-hand corner of its cover recalls that pre-inflation time. Funny thing is I don't recall reading the book. It was on my shelf and I felt as though I had read it, but perhaps I absorbed it by osmosis from the time and the people with whom I lived and worked.

What triggered me to read the book was an email which arrived a month ago from Larry Chrispyn asking about the whereabouts of Barry Stevens' son, John Stevens. He said he wrote a poem called "The Wooden Bow" about a bowl given to him by Barry around 1980. I explained to him what I knew of John Stevens, that he had changed his name to Steve Andreas and was involved in Neuro-Linguistic Programming(1). His email led me to pull down this book and to begin to read it in earnest, recalling thirty-five years ago when I began allowing the river to flow by itself in my world.

One could assume that Barry's son John was led to Gestalt Therapy by her, but, surprisingly, the opposite is the case, as she reveals on the first page:

[page 1] In October 1967, my son sent me an application form and a letter saying, "Sign up! You won't forget it." I signed up, for a five-day week of mornings, 9 to 12, in San Francisco, with a man named Fritz Perls, at the Gestalt Institute. I had no idea what I was getting into.(2)



By the end of 1967, Barry had co-authored a book with Carl Rogers titled, *Person to Person*, and, surprisingly, once more, it was her son John who triggered Barry's relationship with Carl Rogers.

[page 74] When he was twenty-three, my son said, "Let's face it. You're a therapist to me and I'm a therapist to you."

It was he who brought me a paper by Carl Rogers, which led eventually to *Person to Person*.

If Gestalt is all awareness, what is there to be said about it? Not much — as a result Barry doesn't talk about Gestalt, only about her own awareness and how it grew through her interactions with Fritz along the way. Here's an example:

[page 2,3] Once, I told Fritz why I didn't want to do what he had told each of us, in turn, to do. Then I thought, maybe there's some value in this that I don't see, and asked him, "Do you want me to do it anyway?" He said nothing. Like an Indian, he said it altogether. There wasn't one part of him anywhere that was saying anything. It was up to me.

Another time, when I was about to take the hot seat, I noticed a folder containing some of his manuscript on the chair on which I was to sit. I said, "Am I supposed to sit on it, or take it off?" He said, "You are asking me. "

Both times, I had to decide for myself. I don't do so much asking now. This brings some of my power back into me.

A friend who teaches seventh and eighth grades in a school on the California desert switched from having her students say, "May I get my paper from your desk?" to "I'm coming to the desk and get my paper." The whole class livened up.

... When I say "Please may I?" I may *think* that I am ladylike and superior. At the same time, I *feel* inferior, weak, pleading, at the other person's mercy. The other has my life in his hands. I lose my sense of *I*, in bowing to you. When I just *do* it (not rudely), I feel strong. My power is in me. Where else should *my* power be?

Of course, I may get thrown out.

Gestalt is about getting livened up, about re-owning your power, which is important in a world of rules and expectations which strive to take away our power. Doing so may cause you to get thrown out of a group whose expectations you ignore. Fritz knew how to deal with such groups.

[page 3] Fritz was giving a demonstration in a high school auditorium. A fellow got up and made the usual announcement about no smoking, fire regulations, and so on. After the demonstration, a young woman asked Fritz, who had smoked all through, as usual, "What right do you have to go on smoking, when some of us have our tongues out for a cigarette?"

Fritz said, "I don't have the right to, and I don't have the right not to — I just do it."

Young woman: "But suppose you get thrown out?"

Fritz: "I get thrown out."

When we rely on rules instead of awareness, things happen that we don't like. People can die and we can feel blameless because we followed the rules and expectations of others. Barry would have died if her father had not ignored her doctors' prognosis.

[page 14] I was an incubator baby. The doctors in Manhattan gave me back to my father because I was dying anyway. (My mother was in the hospital for a long time, very sick.) My father didn't study books. He studied *me*, and discovered something. And here I am. (His discovery was later validated by the medical profession, when they changed their minds about how premature babies should be treated.)

One imagines that kids don't like to follow rules, but I was witness to a prominent exception, in which kids were horrified by adults who refused to follow the rules when it came to eating cake. I have been thinking of this episode following the recent death of Anne Teachworth, head of the New Orleans Gestalt Center back in the 1970s because she is the only person I could recall now of this group comprising adults who were into awareness instead of rules. They had brought their children and the following happened. For dessert someone had brought a chocolate doberge cake, a rich torte, 8 thin slices of yellow cake separated by chocolate pudding all covered with chocolate fudge. One of us decided to stick a finger into the icing and pull away a piece of cake. That looked like fun so the rest of us adults began doing the same thing. I remember Anne going, Yummy! when she licked her fingers and gave a big kid-like smile. After a few minutes, we called over the actual kids to join our fun, but they were literally grossed out from watching adults eating cake in a way they were taught not to do. Their rules kept them from having fun in a way that, absent any adults, they might have done on their own. But the adults in their heads were ever present.

This is an example of adults, who being into awareness through exposure to Gestalt training, had done something like the Navajo Indians Barry spent some time around. In this example, it was the non-Indian adults who were horrified by a non-rule-based eating of food.

[page 48] On the Navajo reservation, Beulah, the cook in the dormitory one morning gave the children fried eggs by putting the fried eggs in their hands. They carried them into the dining room, sat at the table and ate them out of their hands.

HORRORS!

This was talked about over a hundred miles of reservation for two weeks — by the white folks.

An Indian is someone who does not say "Thank You" or "You're Welcome." Someone, who if they spill milk on a table, they reach over and lap it up. When Barry told a young boy to do exactly that after he spilled his milk, boy's mother who was watching said, "You are not like other white women. They say you must get the mop. By the time you get the mop the milk is on the floor." Barry said, "My living there felt so much more vital, and I so much more spontaneous and alive." (Page 49) Writing while the Vietnam War was still in progress:

[page 49] "Indian" is not skin-color. It is a way of living which does not lead to Vietnam.

"Indian" is a Navajo woman who told me that when she was in school, the white woman physical education instructor taught her how to cheat, how to stumble so that it would throw off another player and seem to be an accident, how to *win*. "And now," she said, "I have to work *so hard* to get that out of me."

In the 1970s, something called New Games became popular. What distinguished them from normal games was their focus on fun and lack of emphasis on winning. At a Radical Therapy Conference in Ames, Iowa, I joined a game of volleyball in which neither side kept score. I found the process freeing and fun. No one needed to keep score, and each side tried its best to make the next point, so there was competitive fun, but never any concern about winning the game, only playing one's best for the next point.

Gestalt is about process, about being in the moment and aware. Content is a description of some process, and therefore content must always come after the process described is completed. This created a paradox for Barry which she described like this: "I am in trouble. This book was going to be about Gestalt. The more I know Gestalt, the less there is that I can say." (Page 52)

Facts are content describing some process which has already happened. Since everyone has a different fantasy of what happened, facts, when written into content become fantasy or fiction. Barry Stevens was aware of the fluid nature of facts, that they resembled a river that one cannot step into twice because the river has changed between steps.

[page 57] "Fantasy!" says the man who reads Facts to the man who reads Fiction, unknowing that the facts are fantasy, or even if they weren't when written, they are by the time they're read.

In her story "Here and There" Barry imagines herself in Hawaii a hundred years in the future. She predicts a flat screen TV the size of a wall and notices a woman coming out of the screen into the room. She also imagines "silent" vehicles that people use for transport similar to our present day electric cars. Everyone seems to be fully aware and living in the present, until she hears that the Governor is coming the next day and she feels some anxiety, anxiety which proves to be unwarranted.

[Page 199] The Governor came over to us and sat on the grass, talking of the rainbows of that morning. It seemed they had been exceptionally good, and he was particularly fond of rainbows. He smiled in my direction and said, "They can be collected, you know."

A Governor who collects rainbows instead of politicians and followers — a novel idea! I was inspired to write a poem about rainbows.

A Rainbow in Itself

You can't collect rainbows,
but you can remember them.

Like the brilliant morning rainbow
which greeted me on the day
I became different and
grabbed my life by the pen.

Like the daily rainbows
which graced every waterfall
on the rainy isle of Kauai.

Like the evening rainbow
which chased me
in my VW Bug and
helped me find the Pot O'Gold
was in my heart.

You can't collect rainbows
but you can re-collect them .

A poem can be a rainbow in itself.

No book which inspires me to write a poem is a waste of time to read, and Barry managed this twice so far, my second poem coming about page 267. But first, Mrs. Chumley gives instructions on how to play solitaire with a deck of cards. What is curious about this particular way of playing solitaire is that it appeared ten years later in the first edition of Windows operating system and became a very popular past-time for many people, among them my wife, my dad, and my uncle, among others. For many people it was this game called FREECELL which helped them to learn how to manipulate a mouse for the first time. (Page 207) The key innovation of the new game was parking places into which you could free cards that were otherwise blocked from a move. The parking places turned solitaire into a game in which strategy and tactics were added on top of luck. Any time you got stuck you could repeat the game from the beginning and find a path which led to success that you had not tried the previous time. This repeat process later appeared in the movie "Groundhog Day" in which Bill Murray woke up on Groundhog Day over and over again and the same set of events took place except for the things he chose to do. Given

enough tries, he was able to get his co-worker to eventually fall in love with him during one long day of doing everything perfectly to woo her — he changing into a nicer person in the process.

[page 267] How simple life is. Live with awareness, not by rules or conditioning or thinking or shoulds or shouldn'ts. How difficult it is to see all the rules and conditioning and thinking and shoulds and shouldn'ts which come between I and Thou, and between I and me. Clearly this is not *mankind*, for all of them vary from place to place, from time to time, from culture to culture, from subculture to subculture. And when we try to break with this, we are likely to fall into another trap. Reaction to convention is still tied to the convention. Going from one opinion to another, I am still opinioned.

Opinioned, what a lovely word! It sounds like an exclamation *O*, followed by the transitive verb *pinioned*. It would be useful to look at the dictionary definition of *pinion* — to cut the wings to prevent flight, to fetter the arms, to bind fast to — a listing of the various bad things that an opinion does to one, whether it is someone else's or one's own, and mostly out of one's awareness.

O Pinion Me Not

- O pinion me not on the grey prairie
- O pinion me not in Cedarn Shoulds
- O pinion me not with Great Expectations
- O pinion me not in Black Forest woods

- O pinion me not with politicians
- O pinion me not with anxious ambitions
- O pinion me not with opinions
- Because that's all that we've got.

We cannot follow a map in life, because maps are dead objects, not living things. The Norwegian Boy Scout Handbook in the section on Map Reading gives the only sane advice to intrepid map-readers, "If the terrain differs from the map, Believe the terrain!" The same advice works for following the dead opinions of others, "If the terrain of life differs from the opinions you have introjected as fact, believe the terrain!"



----- *Footnotes* -----

Footnote 1. The poem and my answer to Larry Chrispyn appears in *DIGESTWORLD* Issue [#123](#).

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**Footnote 2.** About twelve years later I met John Stevens and told him to sign up for the afternoon session where Eric Marcus would be talking about the new work of Richard Bandler and John Grinder. He resisted, so I probably told him something like "Sign up! You won't regret it" which advice was similar to that he gave his mother. He went and helped create the first neuro-linguistics book, *Frogs into Princes*.

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