

Journey into Healing
Combining Workshops with a Retreat –
The Gestalt Approach
by Sharon Stinson May 2008

I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away
(and wait to watch the water clear, I may):
I sha'nt be gone long.—You come too.

In just a few lines Robert Frost has captured the essence of a *Journey into Healing* workshop. During 36 hours, participants are invited to visit the spring in their lives; to gather the leaves that may have accumulated; to find some means to remove the blockage; and to do it together in a group setting.

Journey into Healing blends a workshop into a retreat setting. In groups of six to eight with two facilitators, each group member is given time to explore various aspects of 'unfinished situations' in his or her life. Raking some leaves away may free a person to see the way through a difficult situation or find freedom to make a pressing decision. Others may decide to look at the clutter that has hindered a relationship. Some participants find a puzzling dream asks for special attention. Often members come unsure of anything to 'work' on, but through the support of others, they discover their purpose, or their own unfinished situation.

The day often begins with a reflection on scripture, a walk in nature, or some body movement with music. After lunch the group members are free to walk, sleep, read or reflect on the workshop. Each evening ends with a time of quiet to review the day.

While all of the facilitators have training and experience in spiritual accompaniment, healing prayer, and various therapies, the primary approach used in *Journey into Healing* is Gestalt. Gestalt recognizes emotional and physical healing as a natural process. *Journey into Healing* adds a Christian perspective that believes the Holy Spirit is intimately and personally involved in the process, that God's nature offers ways for this healing to occur. The Gestalt facilitator acts as a catalyst that enables a member to strive toward wholeness frequently by talking *to* a situation or person rather than talking *about* it. As a retreatant brings a pressing 'unfinished situation' into the here and now, he or she will be invited to explore some suggestions in order to move toward a completion, a Gestalt.

In a recent workshop, a group member chose to speak of her struggle with strong authority figures in the church. Placing a cushion on an empty chair to represent a person who had belittled her in the past, she spoke as if the person were present. She experienced the hurt and despair that she had known in his presence years ago, and in so doing she felt small and condemned. Encouraged to speak out her feelings, she then began to find a release that surprised her. She began to laugh as she realized that she no longer needed to carry this heavy burden. The group joined her with joyful laughter. A Gestalt was complete, and she invited the supportive group to gather around her and offer a blessing.

All of the group members during this *Journey into Healing* moved into greater freedom and understanding. Two went home with incomplete Gestalts, but better equipped to strive toward wholeness. One young man, planning to attend a theological college, said, 'I rediscovered and appreciated my vulnerable side and also discovered hidden treasures within.' A woman in her sixties said: 'Exploration in new territory. I gained joy after a long hard road. It was good to be with a small group sharing life together and learning much from this. God is at work and I am grateful.'

For over twenty-five years *Journey into Healing* has been offering workshops. They are held in various diocesan retreat houses and also at Whitehill Chase, home of the Acorn Christian Healing Foundation in Hampshire, the Bield at Blackruthven near Perth, and the Peace Centre near Tadcaster. Day sessions are offered from time to time in York and Guildford.

In March of 2008, six of the principal facilitators journeyed to New York to meet with Revd Tilda Norberg and her Gestalt Pastoral Care team. She has written extensively about her Gestalt work with groups. The *Journey into Healing* facilitators discovered that her book *Consenting to Grace* resonated with their work in the UK. The exchange with Norberg has opened the door for networking with the USA team and continuing to learn from each other.

For more information, see the websites for *Journey into Healing UK* (www.journeyintohealing.co.uk) and *Gestalt Pastoral Care USA* (www.gestaltpastoralcare.com). In the UK Canon Mark Wilson, the present coordinator, may be contacted by e-mail: mark@journeyintohealing.co.uk. Printed leaflets offering dates for the workshops are available.