

PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

Sunday, March 13, 1994

Section: FEATURES STYLE

Edition: FINAL

Page: G01

WOUNDED HEALER

A WOMAN WHO HAS SOMEHOW SURVIVED A DEVASTATING DISEASE HELPS OTHERS OVERCOMETHEIR ANGUISH. SHE DOES THIS AT HER PENNSYLVANIA GESTALT CENTER IN PAOLI.

By Marie McCullough, INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

TEXT: The names of the workshop participants have been changed to protect their privacy.

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In a parlor of what feels like a cozy country inn, 30 adults stand in a circle, holding hands, swaying to gospel music on a CD player. Some close their eyes blissfully; others glance around self-consciously. Each has paid at least \$175 to spend this weekend at a rented conference house in Paoli, hoping to heal psychic wounds at a workshop run by the Pennsylvania Gestalt Center.

Explaining how gestalt therapy works is hard, even for practitioners. The center's brochure, lapsing into psycho-jargon, says gestalt work involves being "contactful" and expressing "organismic truth." As they lower themselves onto the rug, even those who aren't sure what they've gotten into are confident that **Mariah Fenton Gladis**, the center's founder and leader, will be inspiring.

She has a gift, people say, an empathy and instincts that are uncanny.

Gladis, a striking redhead of 46, flips on a tiny microphone. Her speech is labored, slightly slurred, but she is, she assures them, "clean and sober."

"I have amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, sometimes called Lou Gehrig's disease," she tells the group, though most already know. "My body has been weakened; however, my soul and mind have not. They have been strengthened. I have had this 13 years. I have given birth to two wonderful sons and plan to go on a long, long time. Now, that is my challenge, and out of that challenge, I have drawn meaning. It is my journey to make my own trauma a positive force in my life. And to make it useful, not useless. That is really why we are all here. Everyone in this room has their own challenge or heartbreak - and their own opportunity for elevation and healing."

She pauses, having summed up the paradox of the wounded healer: What is stealing her life also enriches it. In bearing the anguish of an incurable disease, she better learns how to heal the anguish of others.

Many attest eagerly to her inspiring powers: The man who quit decades of drug addiction after one weekend of therapy. The woman who confronted cancer with optimism. The alcoholic who went from being **Gladis'** professor to being her pupil - and patient.

Now, **Gladis** asks for help getting to her feet. Her gait is steady but spastic.

Today, she will work with participants individually, putting each before the group - on the "hot seat," in gestalt lingo - and guiding the enactments, fantasy dialogues and role-playing that give gestalt therapy its drama.

For some, the half-hour hot seat session will be an emotional vitamin in a basically happy, healthy life. For a few, it will be the psychological equivalent of a heart transplant. For most, it will be part of long-term therapy with **Gladis** or others.

Among the first on the hot seat is Phil, a sturdy-looking highway engineer who has traveled from Upstate New York at the urging of his wife, a graduate of a previous workshop.

Before Phil can utter a word, he breaks down, weeping in a defenseless, childlike way.

"Why don't you tell people what's happening in your life?" **Gladis** gently prompts.

"A year and a half ago," he says, struggling for composure, "my son was diagnosed with an optical brain tumor. He just turned 5. We thought he needed glasses because we knew something was wrong with his vision. Now he's legally blind. And two months ago, my wife found out she has breast cancer. She had a mastectomy and they're both on chemotherapy."

He sobs, his broad shoulders quivering with grief, then groans, "I wish I could just crawl into a little ball and be taken care of."

Whatever unusual gift **Gladis** has, it will be put to the test trying to help this open sore of a man.

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The rutted gravel that serves as a road to **Gladis'** home and office in Malvern does not prepare visitors for the handsome cedar-and-stone structure.

Gladis and her husband, Ronn, bought the rustic property "for a song" seven years ago, she says, then renovated it themselves. Just another example of their faith and determination. They weren't even married in 1981 when they were told she would soon be dead.

She was 33, a talented social worker with a fast-growing therapy practice and a pioneering gestalt center, the Bucks County Institute, now called the Pennsylvania Gestalt Center. She was rebuilding her relationship with her mother, an alcoholic whom she had tough-loved through recovery after **Gladis'** father died from drink. She and Ronn, an engineer-turned-photographer she had adored since they began dating five years earlier, were going out to dinner to celebrate his birthday - and, she suspected, so he could propose.

That afternoon, she went to her doctor. He listened carefully as she complained that her hand kept cramping, especially when she played racquetball.

"The doctor said, 'I think you have a cerebral brain tumor that's inoperable,'" **Gladis** recalls with a rueful smile.

The correct diagnosis, reached a few weeks later after more tests, was just as devastating: She'd be dead in six months to two years. Five years at most. Felled in her prime like Lou Gehrig, baseball's Iron Horse.

Worse, death would come only after her body - but not her mind - weakened and failed. Her deteriorating motor neurons would steadily steal her ability to move, talk, swallow and, finally, breathe - without numbing her awareness of the irreversible process.

On a shelf in her office sits a copy of *A Brief History of Time* by the brilliant physicist Stephen Hawking. He has survived ALS for a remarkable 28 years, but for almost a decade, he has been paralyzed, withering away in a wheelchair, communicating through a voice synthesizer.

Gladis, in contrast, is still going strong. She conducts individual and family therapy. She regularly leads workshops here and at Esalen Institute in Big Sur, Calif., the world-famous bastion of all things

alternative. She works out on a stationary bike. She sculpts. She plays chauffeur to her busy sons and roots them on at soccer and basketball games.

"I think the ALS people should study her," says her friend Kenneth Duckworth, a psychiatrist at the Harvard Medical School.

Medical experts - and she has consulted the best - tell her she is "lucky," her case seems to be "indolent" and her slow progression is not likely to speed up.

She knows better. She believes she slowed the disease by refusing to give in to it, as she once refused to witness her mother's self-destruction. After **Gladis** was diagnosed, she prayed and meditated. She intensified her longtime regime of organic diet and exercise. She tapped alternative therapies, including vitamins, acupuncture, massage and, of course, gestalt.

"I knew I was given an invitation to die and if I wanted to walk down that path, I could," she says. "I chose to walk the other way, toward life."

Her husband was her compass.

They married two months after her diagnosis. She got pregnant with Luke, now 13, on their wedding night - to the later horror of doctors who warned the physical stress could be suicidal. Their second son, Cole, was born two years later.

"In the beginning," she says, "Ronn was so firm in his belief that I would be all right. I rode on his wings for many years. For so many years, our kids didn't even know what I had. I didn't want them to have to deal with it. We were running on sheer determination. Some will call that denial."

Always adept at drawing insight from her own experiences, **Gladis** has used her illness to explore the wellsprings of suffering and to embolden her patients to change their lives.

"I'm acutely aware that we don't have time. In my estimation, traditional therapy has taken way too long and been way too ineffective and avoided the heart of the matter."

Another characteristic - perhaps rooted in her Main Line Catholic upbringing - is her belief in miracles.

"To me," she says, "the extraordinary is not out of the ordinary."

Still, there is no denying her battle is getting tougher. She awoke one recent morning to discover she had lost another skirmish: She couldn't flex the little finger on her left hand. As her symptoms worsen, she worries how much to tell people she meets casually - and whether her words will be intelligible.

"When my voice began to go, it was a nightmare. A real nightmare. I wondered, 'How will I work? What will people think?' For me to make a simple phone call is horrible.

"Ronn can't deny it anymore, either," she says. "I wish he could. He believes science will outrace my progression and I'll live long enough to see a cure."

Later, Ronn **Gladis**, a lanky 51-year-old with longish gray hair and the resonant tones of a radio announcer, talks about finding a footing between denial and despair.

"We have, from the beginning, tried to lick this thing," he says. "And we have. And we'll continue to. Are we dealing with something very real? Yes. We don't have our heads in the sand."

"Initially," he says, "denial is a great strength. How do I come to grips with it now? It's not easy.

Fortunately for us, it's been a long-term thing, so it's been putting one foot in front of the other.

Mariah's work is very inspiring and that feels good. She's not just been sitting around, thinking about (ALS). I take some comfort in that."

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It becomes clear, while watching **Mariah Fenton Gladis** at work, that gestalt therapy can be at once a cathartic moment of insight - and a contrived melodrama.

People take back words they regret, say things they wish they had said. The if only's and why me's that weigh people down are expressed, explored and resolved. Supposedly. Hopefully. The medical

establishment remains rather skeptical of the 40-year-old therapy, largely because it was long considered show without substance, theater without theory.

The techniques, many of which have seeped into the mainstream via self-help books, grow out of gestalt psychology's central tenet: The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. (Gestalt is German for "pattern" or "organized whole.")

Practitioners look at how people behave at the moment of the therapeutic encounter - the "here and now," in gestalt lingo - and, unlike Freudians, examine the past only in relation to the present. For example, a gestalt therapist might help a perfectionist client see how her actions are hurting her work and family life. Only then would the therapist seek the cause - and discover, perhaps, that the client is repeating the pattern of her own perfectionist mother.

The question is: Does it work?

Phil hoped so when he traveled to Paoli. He had seen how a previous weekend workshop rejuvenated his wife. Before the workshop, she had been as stoic as him about the illness of their son - the youngest of their three children - but was clearly depressed. "Numb" was how she described it. After the workshop, she began writing her dreams down, expressing her feelings, "opening her heart." Even the discovery that she had breast cancer did not crush her spirit; she started a support group. Phil, meanwhile, felt hapless, helpless, hopeless. He kept accidentally injuring himself. After he badly sliced a finger, his wife said, "I think this is your body's way of telling you something."

If anyone in the cozy parlor needs to believe in gestalt therapy, it is Phil.

Gladis gazes at his tear-stained face and says gently, "So you are carrying the family hurt. Why don't you go ahead and crawl up in that ball?"

A lightweight mattress is placed before him. A dirge fills the room. Mood music is a distinctive, albeit sometimes-hokey, part of **Gladis'** style.

With Phil still in the fetal position, **Gladis** gathers the group close to stroke and caress him. She coaches Phil to vent his ferocious anguish and anger - "More! More!" she urges as he weeps - and to scream for help. Then, as a soothing Brahms melody swells, she tells the group to offer encouragement.

"You're carrying a monumental load," a man says sincerely.

"It's hard to watch people you love suffer," murmurs another.

"Phil," says an elderly woman, "I had breast cancer. It was diagnosed in 1971. And here I am."

Tears are running down many cheeks, including **Gladis'**.

"What can we give you, Phil? What is it?" she asks.

"I need to feel I'm part of the world. Connected," he says after a moment.

Gladis directs him to stand, then fall backward onto the mattress, which is braced by the group. The group lifts, then rocks him as Willie Nelson sings "Bridge Over Troubled Water."

Phil's crying becomes mixed with hiccups of relieved laughter.

"We're going to pray for a miracle," Gladis tells him.

Three months later, during a phone interview, Phil calls the weekend "a wonderful release."

"I felt very alive," he says. "It made me feel - feel - more in touch with my own response."

He sighs. "I wish I could hold onto it forever."

The weekend has hardly been a panacea. Around Christmas, his boss ordered him to take a six-week layoff. His health insurance was not interrupted and the break gave him more time to minister to his family. Still, unemployment came as a blow, proof that he is expendable at a company he thought he would run someday.

On the other hand, he says he feels calmer and stronger than before the workshop. For that, he feels grateful to Gladis.

"Gestalt therapy may be wonderful, but I think it's secondary to the person who does it," he says. "I've never done (gestalt) with any other therapist, but I know Mariah is special."

Good therapists make their patients feel that way, according to gestalt luminaries Erving and Miriam Polster, whose 1973 book *Gestalt Therapy Integrated* has become a manual for practitioners.

"Good therapists, whatever their theoretical base, are exciting people," the Polsters write. "Their talk and actions are incisive and stimulating. After being with them, one feels renewed and heartened long afterward."

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Not everyone in the room has needs as desperate as Phil's.

Crystal has a yearning, a classic example of "unfinished business."

A young wife, mother and professional musician, she wants to initiate reciprocal I love you's with her parents - particularly her demanding father. She has wanted to say those three little words for years, but now, with her father facing coronary bypass surgery, the urge is greater.

For Crystal's hot-seat work, Gladis has an elderly couple from the group play her parents.

"You know we've never had a real demonstrative family," Crystal tells them. "I just wanted to tell you how much I love you. . . . And I've always wanted you to tell me I'm good enough - without achievements. I'm just your little girl and I'm good enough as a person."

It sounds ripped from a script of thirtysomething, and Crystal knows it. She apologizes for having such a "small" problem.

Yet the workshop turns out to help her with a large insecurity.

"I think what's changed," she says during an interview three months later, "is that I've exorcised that internal father who's a critic, so I don't always assume I'm subpar or not good enough. When I catch myself thinking that way after a performance, I step back and say, 'Are you projecting?'"

No, she says, she still hasn't confronted her parents, but she intends to when she visits them in Florida this month, just before her father's surgery. "I'm going to bring some of this stuff up," she vows.

For Gladis, the size of the problem isn't an issue. She believes no problem is too small - or too big - to get better.

Still, it is her gift for helping people who are, frankly, psychological messes, that inspires awe, that makes clients talk about feeling reborn.

George is an example. He happily hops on the hot seat, saying he wants to work on breaking his self-destructive habit of creating chaos and crisis in his life. Over the years, Gladis has helped the 40-ish fabric company owner understand this habit in the context of his relationship to his deceased parents, who were survivors of the Holocaust.

"I love disasters," he tells the group. "I love rescuing and overcoming, so I can prove I'm as tough as my parents. I'm a survivor, too."

He was surviving, unhappily, when he attended his first workshop with Gladis four years ago.

Afterward, he abruptly ended decades of drug abuse.

"I almost felt transformed," he said in an interview. "I called someone who knows Mariah and said, 'What's with this woman?' She's the only person I know who lives what she preaches: She's in touch. It's not that she's divinely touched; she's just learned to do this as a way of life."

Since that first workshop, he has extricated himself from a bad marriage, revived the family business he almost bankrupted, moved out of the childhood home he had kept as a shrine to his parents, and taken steps toward a career change. He also has nearly completed Gladis' three-year training program, which mostly draws mental-health professionals.

"My basic purpose (in becoming a trainee) was to get more of Mariah before she went. Which is very cutthroat. But she's the best. She's very talented."

Joyce Lewis, a professor of social work in Bryn Mawr College's Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research, recognized that talent when she had Gladis as a student in 1970. Lewis was happy to be invited to attend one of Gladis' first gestalt workshops in the mid-1970s.

"I was absolutely thrilled and impressed with her work," Lewis recalls. "I was high for about two weeks from it."

Not long after, they began an unusual role reversal, with Lewis becoming Gladis' student.

And patient.

"She helped me change my life," Lewis says. "I was still an active alcoholic like her mother. I worked with her while I was struggling to get sober. She helped me do the most important work I've ever done."

"Somehow, Mariah transmitted to me that I had the strength to change my life," Lewis says. "She knows what pain is and does not shrink from it."

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After nearly 20 years as a therapist - after leading workshops in the United States, Canada, Mexico, the West Indies and Europe and joining the faculty of Esalen - Gladis is not particularly well-known in gestalt academic circles.

Colleagues such as Lewis say it's basically because Gladis hasn't written books and scholarly articles and no longer attends the Gestalt Journal's annual conference.

This, Gladis says, is by choice. Spending time with her family is paramount.

"Creating memories is a priority," she says.

Although money is tight, they do not put off pleasures. They have been to Disney World, California, Maine and the Caribbean.

"I wanted to snorkel with my sons while I can," she says. "Now, I really want to show them Europe." Thinking of them brings tears.

"I never knew how much I could love," she says. "I'm in heaven with them every day. They can be obnoxious like all kids, but like most parents, I feel they are so unique. And I think, strange as it is, having the illness gives me a daily reminder that I have to get it right. I have my moments of being too critical or too demanding, but my lag time between error and self-correction is short." The hard-won wisdom of the wounded healer.

"It is the irony," she says. "The illness is not without blessing. But I keep saying (to God), 'I've learned, God. I promise I won't forget. Just take it away.'"