

## Talk on Gestalt Nov 2012 – “Modality Wars”

First of all - this is *my* version of Gestalt, I'm sure there are many who would disagree with me, but all mature modalities are fairly broad churches.

I don't want to get into modality wars – all approaches are after all exploring the structure and meaning of what it is to be a human being – and the convergence between modalities recently seems to have been speeding up, especially with regards to the importance of the body in therapy, and the importance of attending to the here and now - which is wonderful.

But, on the other hand, I do ... after all we have to believe in truth, however relative a concept we take it to be. We all fight for our own perspective; it is after all about our self-validation.

At a deep level our pathology is always manifested in our theory. This has been clear from Inquisition to the Nazis and Communism to modern day politics as well as in today's plethora of therapeutic modalities. Our understanding is bound to reflect our pathology, our blind spots, our shadow – my own included.

So whilst claiming to know what's 'right' is obviously always dangerous, at the same time we can't stop doing it. I can't stop doing it, it's part of my self-support. It is also part of my experience of finding and understanding and searching for ever deeper levels of truth. It's not surprising that modality wars can get very intense, none of us wants to let go of what we have spent many years working hard to understand, I'm very aware of my attachment, of all my hard work.

But ... in the spirit of exploring 'what is' ... I may as well take the plunge into disagreement ...

My biggest 'beef' is with therapies that claim wonderful results in amazingly short times. One of these I have recently become aware of is the “Human Givens” approach.

My journey started in my mid-teens, some forty five years ago and has including over twenty five years of personal therapy in one form or another. I'm still learning to face aspects of myself rooted in the adjustments to hurt that I made as a child. My experience of myself and my clients and everyone I meet reaffirms to me that real change takes time. We are constantly maintaining the complex whole that is our self, each part exists in relationship to all the others, changing any one part affects the whole and so for real change to occur there has to be, however small, a complete re-configuring.

I get frustrated by therapies that try to facilitate self-calming and self-manipulative strategies, with their attempt at “symptom reduction”, as though they were some glorified semi-medicalised anti-depressant. My experience is that it is only through facing and bearing our pain, our hurt, distress, our fear etc., at ever deeper levels, that we find genuine freedom.

I also get frustrated with therapies that claim that they are the 'bees knees' – after all only Gestalt qualifies for that -

But more seriously there always seem to be 'new' therapies popping up that are just re-inventing the wheel and then claiming to be the “new best thing” – if only they did a modicum of historical research, they could see that their ideas have been around for decades or centuries, but they are either ignorant or too arrogant to reference them.

We are incredibly cunning at constructing bullet-proof defences for our shadow aspects, which are themselves simply defences against our denied pain. Often these are in the form of some cognitive

structure or belief that supports the maintenance of our status quo. We eagerly gather in everything that supports how right we are, ignoring and dismissing everything else. ...

Perhaps it's just me that does this!

Then there are those therapies that don't have a coherent understanding of the depth of what it means to be a human being, of what our psychological developmental journey is towards. This means that they haven't attended to and incorporated into their whole, every aspect of human experience, which in this context usually means the transpersonal or spiritual dimensions.

OK – from this, how does Gestalt match up.

Firstly Gestalt is holistic, it appreciates how the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts, and how the whole, i.e. our self, is always maintained as an active process in the here and now. The self is not some given fixed thing, it's an active structure that we have to constantly maintain. Gestalt understands that the laws governing this structure are the laws of life, firstly about survival, survival of the self, then there are the compensatory processes we use to defend ourselves from that which don't yet have the resources to bear, then there are the "natural" laws concerning our inherent need to heal and grow towards wholeness, greater consciousness and love. Gestalt calls this later "organismic self-regulation". Given half a chance we do heal and mature, just as our bodies naturally do. I understand this as being an aspect of the force that created the Big-Bang, created the conditions for life, created consciousness. I think the ancient Hindus got it right, this force is about the universe becoming conscious of itself, and it wants us to increase our consciousness.

This structure, the self can be held tightly fixed or be amazingly fluid depending on the forces at work within it (and outside it – we are after all hugely field dependant), but the point here is that changing the character of this structure is not about some mechanical tweaking here or there it. Lasting change happens paradoxically, through the process of greater awareness, self-knowledge and self-understanding.

Simplified, the self's core structure is head, heart and body and when all three are able to engage freely in the process of living our lives, of getting our needs met, then we find it a relatively smooth process of contacting and assimilating what we need, satisfaction is followed by withdrawal and rest, before responding to our next arising need. Life is then simple and straight forward.

But what happens for most of us though, is that trauma of some sort caused us to split this self of ours into parts, in order to reduce our awareness, and we now no longer have the resources of our whole self, we don't know what we feel, or we feel too much, we've given up thinking or we over rely on our thinking and we all struggle with having desensitised our bodies - so we struggle to get our needs met.

Gestalt's psychodynamic roots, ground it in 'depth psychology', in understanding how our experience of ourselves is conditioned by our unresolved past experiences. I more and more understand how our current relationship to our lives is conditioned by what were often very young adaptations. Our motivations then come from those very young needs. My giving this talk? Certainly my nervousness at doing so comes insecurity rooted in my childhood. I am not yet able to be what I know.

But Gestalt's great contribution here was to understand how the unfinished from our past is not in the past, it is our now, we maintain it at every moment. We constantly maintain the splits between our head, heart and body, with all the resulting inner conflicts, and all the myriad forms of compensatory defences and adjustments. This is why Gestalt has always maintained (and as most therapies now espouse) that

healing and repair can best be achieved through attending to our current experience, our here and now contains all the information we need if we can only see it, feel it, face it, take responsibility for it, understand it.

This is also why strategies that help, support or encourage us in avoiding facing and seeing the reality of our 'what is', with all its pain, distress, fear etc., can end up being counter-productive. Some approaches like forms of NLP, CBT or even Mindfulness when practiced in a solution focused way, can be so focused on trying to help us "feel better", so focused on change that they ignore its paradoxical nature. Where a deepening awareness of what is, is key. We change through becoming who and what we are, not through trying to become someone different. This often goes together with ignoring the depth of the structure of the self, with its all needs and possibilities - with the result that they can end up supporting the processes of avoidance, rather than growth and freedom. (although anything can be misused)

So we need to look ever more deeply at our motivations, at what is driving us to be the way we are, right now, in detail. The strength of the forces working against this are very strong, the last thing part of us wants is to face the hurt, distress or fear that we have spent a lifetime avoiding.

Broadly, I think that the younger we were when we split, the deeper the pain is buried, and therefore the greater the difficulty we have in being able to see and face it. My experience is one of again and again over the years, facing yet another layer of my insecurity resulting from the need to avoid pain from my childhood, and how at each stage, I faced what I had not previously had the resources to face. This means that as we develop we often have to also face the shame of taking responsibility for what may be increasingly infantile aspects of ourselves.

Last, but not least, Gestalt understands that the trajectory of our psychological healing is towards increasing freedom, wholeness, consciousness and love. That through facing what we have held within us unfinished, for perhaps all of our lives, we diminish our compulsive compensatory ego structures towards a place where head, heart and body are freer to work together and participate in a fuller presence, awareness and beingness. Here, freer from being driven 'to do' in all our myriad compensatory ways we can live closer to our deeper authentic nature in peace and love. This is what mystics down the centuries have pointed to as our spiritual home. To quote from Rumi, "Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it."

Gestalt also knows, what many mystics have espoused, that the here and now is a multi-layered event with the most profound layers being about our connection with Consciousness itself and Love.

I see our journey as a psycho-spiritual one where there is no real distinction between the two, every psychological understanding enables us to "be" more. Every moment of "being" increases our self-support and enables us to in turn face more of our psychology. As we deepen our psychological freedom we inevitably move towards a spiritual connection if we are open and educated to it, as Jung so wonderfully discovered.

So ... to me Gestalt is a way of life, a path towards consciousness, towards being, towards opening our hearts. At the depth of our being there is Consciousness and Love and we *can* slowly open to connecting to this place where we are all connected, as the song goes, "I am you, and you are me, and we are altogether".

This is why, as I understand it, humanistic therapies are more compassionate.

Change, happiness and love are by-products of our search for the truth of who and what we are; the process doesn't work if they become the targets.