

Gestalt therapy needs a clear philosophy - a response to the development of a “Fidelity Scale” for Gestalt therapy

I was reading the BGJ (2016, Vol. 25, No. 1) article about developing a “Fidelity Scale” for Gestalt therapy and thinking “this is all good stuff, look at all those eminent Gestaltists supporting this noble project to help clarify, legitimise and promote Gestalt therapy”. But then I started to feel a little uneasy, how “Gestalt” am I in my practice? This quickly led me to see the dangers in this approach. The door opened, and I saw how this is an intellectual perspective that, if allowed to run its course, leads to intellectual / mechanical assessment of Gestalt therapy, a formulaic set of ideas that trap us rather than set us free. I think NLP and TA have gone down this route, with just such results.

Where, I asked myself, is the heart of Gestalt therapy if it not in these eminently praiseworthy ideas? Gestalt therapy’s heart is surely in its underlying philosophy, rather than in what it looks like in practice, or in some set of “foundational” concepts. This underlying philosophy, which is not addressed in the article, is about “organismic self-regulation”, it is about finding the freedom of “the Tao”, it is about the transformation and transcendence that is possible for human beings, rather than attempting to improve our “performance” or “functioning”. It is about discovering and trusting in our fundamental goodness, in the goodness and wisdom of the “here and now”. It is in our underlying profound orientation towards the emergent nature of health and development and wholeness. It is Gestalt’s strength that it is not so clearly defined, I am reminded of the first words of the “Tao Te Ching”, “The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao”.

What gives deep meaning is what connects us to that which is beyond description, more importantly to what is beyond the level of our ego’s everyday functioning. We use words like “Being”, “God”, the “Divine”, “Emptiness”, “Fullness”, “Non-duality”, “Awareness”, “Consciousness”, “Love”, “Life” etc., for this un-definable core of life. I agree that our first task is heal and repair our ego. But this is not for its own sake, it is in order that we can start the process of letting it go, of transcending our ego in order to embody our connection to what is beyond it. This is what exists only in the profound depth of the here and now. As Rumi put it, “we cannot aim for Love, all we can do is to work to remove the obstacles to Love within us.” Love, Consciousness, Being, God, are what is left in the “here and now” when our ego is transcended.

The “Paradoxical Theory of Change” supports this perspective. By becoming what we are, we become more and more authentic and then as we go deeper into the “here and now” nature of our being, it seems that we can embody more and more clearly the “Goodness, Beauty and Truth” of our potential as human beings. We can embody the “God” aspect of our nature, we can reflect more and more clearly the simple, silent, empty yet full, facet of Consciousness that we are. As many have said, we can realise the “enlightenment” that is already the reality of our consciousness at every moment, but which we are blind to. (Ken Wilber et. al.)

Obviously as therapists we must surely model authenticity and be working towards our own freedom from insecurity, attending to all our defensiveness and compensatory ego structures, always modelling the work that we try to guide our clients towards. It seems to me that this includes working towards “Being” rather than just mending the ego, because they are profoundly connected. Also, many clients glimpse what is beyond their ego and we need to be able to respond and work with them on that level as well. The demand on us is

enormous; maintaining our own development along with increasing our understanding and clarity of what human development is about, which enables us to have some value as a guide for others, in the fullest possible way. This is not about having to be fully developed (enlightened!), it is about taking responsibility for opening our hearts, minds and bodies to the extraordinary potential we have on this incredible journey towards this liberation.

It is a fascinating paradox that surrounds our development, this contradiction between how our path to freedom is through embracing the “here and now”, and, how our ability to embody this is a developmental process that takes time. It takes time to “remove the obstacles” yet our responsibility is always to return to the “here and now”. So, we are condemned, it seems, to fall into the trap of tomorrow (and yesterday), until that is, we can eventually rest in and face the brilliance of now.

I am sad that there is nothing in the “Fidelity Scale for Gestalt Therapy” project about the philosophical ground that Gestalt Therapy stands on! It seems to me that this lack means it is bound lead down the cul-de-sac of becoming technique bound. It does not address the question of what therapy is for? What human development is about or towards? What the meaning of our lives is?

As I see it, there is no getting away from using the “S” word. “Spirituality” is about the “God” part of our nature, and how it is this, that in the end, provides meaning for our lives. Obviously, there are any number of perspectives on this, but at core it seems to be about Love, Consciousness and Energy/Breath, which reflects the basic heart, head and body of our functioning. These are our three basic organs of perception, of our and contact with, our environment / world, so it is natural that each sees, embodies and understands a different facet of “God”. Also “Spirit” is the “greater” that emerges from the integration of the sum of our parts.

It seems to me that we need some connection and understanding of the spiritual in order to find the compassion and love we need to be the best therapists we can be. We need the depth of embodied presence that comes from our “here and now” connection with what is, and how this opens our connection to the “more than the personal”. This helps us to hold a breadth of consciousness that remains open and trusting, one that is sufficiently holistic to avoid being co-opted into any identified ego stance. Also, the knowledge and trust in what our development is towards, gives us direction, not just personally, but also in our work with our clients. It helps us to avoid a lack of direction that can limit our development and that of our clients.

We need the humility that comes from knowing that life’s healing forces come from way beyond our personal selves, that they come from within the deep spiritual underpinning of human nature, from deep within evolution and the expression of consciousness that is this universe. We need the knowledge and understanding of the direction of our destiny towards transformation and transcendence of the ego, so that we can work towards truly being free to embody “spirit” or the “here and now” or however you name the nameless. It seems to me that we are a like a plant at the early stages of growth, with little idea of the amazing form we could unfurl to become, let alone the beauty of the flowers we might be. There is so much potential within us that life wants us to express, so much potential for our being in embodying consciousness. This goes way beyond our small restrictive ego concerns.

For a few lucky people the experience of spirit is direct and wonderful, full of love and compassion, full of embodied consciousness. For others it ranges from moments of psychic, religious, meditative, physical, intellectual or emotional experiences. The important thing about these experiences is that they give us our meaning. They are glimpses of “God”, of the Divine, of the Tao and we instinctively recognise their importance because they are experiences of that which is beyond our ego.

It seems to me that the Gestalt Therapy community needs to address this issue of the philosophical basis for their approach. If it can't embrace the fact that Gestalt is at heart a spiritual / philosophical approach it will continue to be marginalised and stolen from because of its own confusion about itself. The “Fidelity Scale” might well be useful, but without it being held within the wider context of a philosophical understanding of the meaning of life, I am not sure how helpful it is. The founders of Gestalt therapy were, it seems to me, very close to seeing the Universe as Consciousness working towards self-awareness, with us humans being caught up in the sharp end of this process. We have been given choice, we are responsible for ourselves, this comes from the quantity and quality of consciousness we have.

All the eight headings that emerged from developing this “Fidelity Scale”, can be seen as articulating this perspective. I have quickly noted how each can be related to the psycho-spiritual developmental perspective advocated above.

“Awareness is fundamental”

Yes, awareness develops consciousness. Our consciousness makes us human, it gives us choice and self-responsibility and therefore the possibility of transcending the limits of our mechanical ego. Life (“God”) wants this process to unfold.

“Working relationally”

Possibility of meeting “God”, with and in the other, in the non-ego space of “I-Thou”

“Working in the here and now”

The magic of self-integration, openness to what is, letting go of the ego through moving into being, moving past our incessant, compulsive, compensatory “doing”.

“Phenomenological practice”

Trusting that through awareness, “Organismic Self-regulation” and the “Paradoxical Theory of Change”, meaning, healing and development will emerge

“Working with embodiment”

The wisdom of the body - how awareness of sensation and breath are fundamental to self-awareness and integrating the self.

“Field sensitive practice”

There are always more perspectives that we can include. This is about making our consciousness ever more holistic.

“Working with contacting processes”

Exploring how our ego / insecurity is always manifesting through creating compulsive compensatory ways of being.

“Experimental attitude”

Openness to the creativity that flows from the “void”, the sub-conscious. Again, trusting in the profound wisdom of life that is always working to realise our potential, to expand our consciousness and connection to “here and now”.

Placing a psycho-spiritual perspective at the heart of Gestalt, enables these headings to become an expression of something liberating, rather than enclosing, narrowing and reductive, which I'm afraid is where, it seems to me this “scale” leads. I'm afraid it leads, as

all intellectually focused exercises do, to a judgmentalism that is the opposite of what Gestalt therapy to be about.

The implication of all this is that Gestalt is not just a “therapy” for repairing our “functioning”, it is a way of life and path towards “enlightenment”, towards increasingly embodying “Beingness” itself as we “transcend and include” (Wilber) our ego. This to me is what the founders of Gestalt Therapy had in mind when they referenced the Tao and the liberation it represents (PHG 1951).

For Gestalt therapy to embody its potential it needs to claim this ground of meaning. I know this goes against the deeply held “post-modernist” perspectives of many Gestaltists (that there is no ultimate meaning, that we have to live with a sort of ultimate existential relativity, that there is no developmental process through degrees of freedom to anything in particular). But it is this battle that I want to bring more to the surface, getting the polarities increasingly out in the open so that the choices are clear. I see this as the way forward because I hope that out of this there might emerge a greater consensus in favour of this developmental / evolutionary perspective.

This is about Gestalt arguing that it is better than other approaches because it does address the ultimate questions around human existence and relate them to our here and now difficulties. It does, and can, have answers. People resonate with “the truth” at a deep instinctive level, this is the function of our conscience, that part of us that knows the difference between the truth and a lie. It is a deeply organismic part.

If Gestalt can claim this ground of ultimate meaning, surely its “significance” will emerge. The Post-modernists are stuck and identified with the old battle (although essential at the time) against power and hierarchy, but this is now holding Gestalt therapy back from being brave enough to stake it’s claim to meaning and purpose. It seems to me that at the moment Gestalt is afraid to say, “this is the nature of reality”. It can obviously only do this from embodying such clarity, but it is just this struggle that I hope is happening.

Fighting the others at their own game of evidence based medicalised / intellectual models seems to me a losing battle, and even if there were victories, they would end up being hollow.