ABOUT NEW GESTALT VOICES

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New Gestalt Voices is a platform to support mostly those who have not published before to share their writings in relation to gestalt therapy and other applications of gestalt practice.

We publish a twice yearly journal, which is issued in PDF format on a free subscription basis, with dissemination via all gestalt teaching institutions and major associations.

In addition to the journal, we also enable sharing of other forms of creativity, including images and audio-visual material, on our website at www.newgestaltvoices.org. There you’ll find much more information about the journal, the people behind it, and the ways in which you can contribute.

If you’d like to be notified when the next edition is published, please sign up for the NGV newsletter via the website.

The experience of writing and sharing writing can be a lonely one. If you have read an article and been moved or provoked, please tell us and our authors about your experience. Most email addresses follow articles, otherwise please write via the editor-in-chief: john@newgestaltvoices.org. We will publish responses in the next edition, and we also invite responses via our website’s forum.
It is with immense pleasure that I write this introduction to the inaugural edition of New Gestalt Voices. In roughly the space of a year, the journal has gone from being an idea in my head to an international community of gestaltists committed to supporting the emergence of new writers from across the gestalt field. When I first invited interest in the idea, I could not have dreamed of the amount of support and goodwill that would materialise.

I was knocked out by the generosity of our profession in supporting an initial crowdfunding campaign last October, without which there certainly would be no journal. We are enormously grateful to everyone who has supported us with donations.

I was particularly moved by the response of almost everybody I approached to write for the journal, and also by those few who came forward without invitation. The almost universal response was “But I don't have anything to say.... and I would love to write!”. To my mind, this is demonstration enough of the need for this journal. My sense is that so many of us don't put our writing out there because we feel it isn't good enough, or we believe that we are still too unformed, or that we can't aspire to the lofty heights of those who do publish. What a shame that we thus deny ourselves the opportunities for insight and unfolding that writing can bring us as creators, and we deny others the gift of bearing witness to our forming ourselves through our writing.

Writing is one of the chief means we have of ‘bodying ourselves forth’ into the world, to use the Shakespearean phrase. Gianni Francesetti has written that the hallmark of the gestalt approach is the transmutation of absence into presence. The journal has affirmed for me the potential of writing, and of sharing our writing, as a catalyst to just such transformations, to say nothing of its potential impact on the gestalt field.

All of the voices contained in this first edition have touched me deeply, and each differently, for the particular flavour of their contribution and the unique way they navigate the chasm between the intimate, vulnerable detail that we traverse in locating our particularity, and the big wider world where things are set on a page, where we may be witnessed, inevitably judged in one way or another. What is notable for me in this process is the need for support: whether that's just knowing that our writing is part of this larger project, at one end of a continuum, to a need for more regular contact and connection, at another.

To facilitate mutual support, we set up
a Facebook group. This made me aware that writing often needs encouragement. As we need an audience, a witness, to be real, so too there is an important role for an ‘other’ or ‘others’ as chaperones to our creative process. Certainly this was the case with my article. Writing does not happen into a void - I would challenge that writing is less an individual process and more a collaborative and co-emergent one than we are led to suppose. This is somewhat belied by the individual names attached to each article - what we contribute is our own and is personal to each of us, and yet there are threads that weave through the whole, back and forth, and unify.

In writing about the aspects of our processes that are most edgy, or have received least support, particularly unfinished aspects (as if process could be anything other than unfinished), we make ourselves vulnerable. In daring to bring to the fore our growing pains, and to show our workings-out, as it were, to the extent that some of our writers do, we invite a new genre of creativity and writing explicitly as process. We invite witnessing of ourselves, and in so doing we invite from you, our readers, the dialogical imperatives of deep listening, and of deeply embodied response. If you are moved by an article please tell us, and our writers. One of the things we aspire to do differently is to use the journal as a starting point for dialogue.

I would particularly like to thank mother and son team, Sally and Trey Taylor, for their work producing the website and the look and feel of this first edition. Sally’s commitment to the vision and aesthetic of this journal has helped it transcend all of my expectations.

The individual pieces and voices speak for themselves. I offer only a few words here as acknowledgement of each of our authors’ accomplishments and of their contribution.

I owe Dawn Gwilt, our first author, enormous thanks for facilitating a space a year ago with Helen Thomas that allowed me to mobilise around the idea of setting up a journal. It is fitting that Dawn’s piece kicks us off. Dawn writes movingly, and from a place of sincerity and vulnerability, about the theme of working at our relational edges, where you and I both pitch into our respective unknowns. She uses her work with one client counterpoised against her writing process to draw out this idea of a relational growing edge.

I am indebted to my friend John Verbos, a Pittsburg based therapist whom I have had the good fortune of entangling processes with more than once, for the gift to our journal of his article on the difference between metaphor and symbol, and what gestalt therapy with adults has to learn from play therapy with children. John’s piece is a dizzying and erudite debut.

I am particularly hopeful for the potential of this journal to forge new ground within gestalt. The next article by Latvian therapist, Nils Konstantinovs, is one that conspicuously does this. Writing about his experience as a religious person of engaging with gestalt therapy, Nils flags a question, very live I think: what would a gestalt therapy look like that is encompassing of the relationship with the divine? Nils makes a distinction between practitioners of religion and spirituality. He argues that the former have been underserved by gestalt. That is until now, and Nils draws on Phil Brownell’s work to offer a way forwards.
My article on the intersection of power, sexuality and gestalt is the product of at least three years of attempting to write this piece. The version you see is the result of re-editing many times over during the past few months. To let this piece go, I have had to work hard against my urge for perfection. I would also like to give explicit thanks to the many individuals who have held me so well over the years during the course of my grappling with this material - you know who you are.

I admit to being so taken with Maria Grigorieva’s piece about “Her way”. And I’ve loved witnessing the whole article come together. Maria is a therapist from Moscow, and hers is a truly idiosyncratic take on what supports and resources her in her practice. Maria writes with refreshing individuality and honesty.

So we come to Olena Zozulya’s article, which brings her unique sensibility to her experience of war in the Ukraine. I remember meeting Olena in Taormina not long after Brexit brought just the sniff of civil instability to UK shores. I felt then, and still feel, the importance to the gestalt world of our coming face to face with what Olena describes as “the crash of the background” brought on by war. The stories she tells are of surviving, of transformation through the utmost of loss.

Irena Jurjevic from Croatia writes with an admirable tautness about how our relationship with food expresses so much more than just this. I haven’t come across much about disordered eating within the gestalt cannon, and still less that combines so well the intoxication and restraint redolent of problematic relationships with food. Irena’s piece is a welcome and thought provoking addition.

And finally, I’m delighted we’ve been able to include an article from the organisational field. ‘Another purpose to branding’ is authored by TraceyKay Coe, a long-term colleague, and inspiration. It’s my hope that more organisational practitioners will be encouraged to write for publication in the journal after reading TraceyKay’s piece.

How we navigate the spaces between fullness and emptiness, between everything and nothingness, between life and death, the void and plenty. These are the enduring messages I take from the voices that weave together for our first edition. We are all survivors, and the writings here evoke in me the profound gift we have of knowing each other.
EXPERIENCES AT THE RELATIONAL GROWING EDGE

By Dawn Gwilt

Since the 1980s Gestalt therapy has been known as a relational approach, whereas in the 60s and 70s there was a more individualistic emphasis (Staemmler, 2016). This shift of perspective is ongoing, and has inspired me to write about the growing edge as experienced in therapy from a relational perspective. I’ve most frequently heard the term ‘growing edge’ used in an individualistic context. For example, going back to 1977 in the introduction to The Growing Edge of Gestalt Therapy Miriam Polster encourages us to “be all of ourselves we can and to live and work at our own growing edge” (p. xvi). In the past I introjected this idea of working at my own growing edge, asking myself questions such as, “What can I change? What can I do differently?” This perspective encourages working in isolation and attending to one side of relationship. More recently, I find the real work is done when I meet with my client at a relational growing edge, asking such questions as, “What is happening between us? How are we impacting on each other?” With this change of emphasis from an individual growing edge to the relational growing edge, my thinking and my work becomes more dialogic, with more focus on ‘the between’. Asking these different questions also grounds me in phenomenology and field theory. In my work as a Gestalt Psychotherapist the question that increasingly comes up for me is, “How do I find and re-find the relational growing edge with my client?” This article is an attempt to discuss this question, through the lens of my work with one client. At the same time, I’m going to write about the relational growing edge that emerges as I write this article; the edge between me and potential readers as I imagine showing more of myself through my writing.

WHAT IS THE RELATIONAL GROWING EDGE?

For me, this is the edge between what is known and unknown, what is familiar and unfamiliar, what is in or out of awareness, and what feels safe and what has elements of risk. Perls described this as a ‘safe emergency’ (Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, 1972/1951, p.187). I like to use the term, ‘supported risk’. At this edge there is enough support to choose to take a risk, or not. The relational growing edge always includes the risk of exposure and shame because this is where I see you, you see me, I see you seeing me, and you see me seeing you. This
edge inevitably stirs up projections; past experiences felt in present time. Because we are exposing more of ourselves to each other, our shame defences are activated. At the same time, we are inviting the possibility of a new experience - of being seen without shame.

Typing these words brings a physical response. There is a sensation in my belly; an alertness and an excitement that was not there a minute ago. It feels like a call to action, or an invitation to come out and play. There is definitely a playful feel to this sensation, a beckoning, mobilising quality. I’m experiencing the sensation of excitement that accompanies something new and unknown, when there is enough safety and support in place for it not to feel overly threatening.

MEETING AT THE RELATIONAL GROWING EDGE

There are probably as many different ways of meeting at the relational growing edge as there are clients and therapists. At times the meeting is subtle and elusive, and at other times more dramatic. Sometimes the movement towards this edge happens naturally, and sometimes it is not so straight-forward. Some questions that encourage this meeting are: What is the quality of contact between us? What is preventing me or my client from showing up more fully? What level of excitement and risk is possible between us with the support that is available? I am inspired by the term, “Walking the narrow ridge”, adapted from Buber, and quoted by Hycner (1995, p.14): “...a narrow, rocky ridge between the gulfs where there is no sureness of expressible knowledge but the certainty of meeting what remains undisclosed” (Buber, 1965, p.184).

Again I feel my excitement rising. I am preparing the ground for writing about a full, rich, satisfying and challenging relationship with a client I’ve seen for over a year. I feel buoyed by the support of this group of new writers, and well-supported by the ethos of this journal: “Sharing as process unfolding, rather than aiming at truth or finality. This is my truth as I see it now, it may change in the future.” I am giving myself permission to let my voice emerge rather than fit some pre-existing shape. I am turning away from effort and struggle, in order to find a voice that feels easier, more natural and unforced. In this moment I feel young and playful, open and free from shame. My excitement is high, and the risk I feel is balanced by support.

A BRIEF CASE HISTORY – ESTABLISHING COMMON GROUND

The client I am choosing to write about has been coming for therapy for just over a year. From the very start of therapy P expressed strong intolerant political views. He didn’t engage in discussion, but vented his anger towards ‘the system’ in front of me. This was the sort of person I would avoid if I met them socially! My reaction included some disgust and also fear of engaging with his forceful, non-personal contact style. My history includes having learned to avoid all political discussion with family members who hold strong and intolerant views. With this client I knew that my policy of avoidance would not get me very far, and I wanted to bring more of myself to the meeting. I wanted to engage and meet his strong views with something of myself, and this meant opening up to a new way of relating. At the same time, he needed to learn how to have a two-way discussion. This was our most obvious relational growing
edge at the start of therapy; an edge where he was stuck in rigidity, and where I was reluctant to come forward. The approach towards meeting at this edge was gradual for both of us.

Looking back, I see that I was missing the common ground in our relationship. The way we began to discover common ground was through his personal story, which was very moving to hear, with a great deal of trauma and neglect in his early life. I felt protective towards him as well as anger towards those who hadn’t provided protection when he needed it most. When I expressed these feelings his eyes would sometimes moisten briefly before moving on. By sharing with me something of his vulnerability, I felt moved, and he saw that I was moved as I saw him, albeit briefly. I began to see how his idealistic views and generalised statements provided a safe place in his mind, where he kept the hurt and trauma of those early years at a distance by avoiding them altogether, or by moving on quickly from his personal history. I also saw how his fighting against the system had become a fixed gestalt, as this was safer than fighting against his negligent care-givers. Through this sharing, we both moved towards each other; I moved towards him in beginning to understand his process, and he moved towards me through sharing and letting in (however briefly) my genuine compassion. In these instances we were both on the same side, sharing common ground, and perhaps something of this needed to be experienced before we could explore difference.

Establishing more common ground between us increased the feeling of safety, not just for my client, but for me as well. Instead of my feelings of disgust and fear, I now saw his political activist energy as an important form of self-support, and I began to feel and express admiration for his strongly held views. My view had shifted from a content focus to a process focus. I could now see and respond to his energy, not just his rigidity. One day, as he expressed a very one-sided and generalised statement, I noticed I felt free to question and express a different perspective. I felt safe enough to share my genuine response, and we ended up having an interesting two-way exchange of ideas. What made this meeting possible? Finding common ground was the first step. The second was my having the intention to look at my own projections and being willing to grow with my client.

**WORKING WITH PROJECTIONS, RETROFLECTION, AND INTROJECTS**

It was through identifying and owning projections that we moved into closer relationship and nearer to a more risky and personal relational growing edge. At first P would say, “You are disappointed in me.” I would then ask if he would rather stay with his assumption, or hear what I actually felt. After some time he began to question me directly instead of making an assumption, as in “Were you frustrated with me last time?”, and he sometimes felt safe enough to voice a projection and then see it for what it was as he returned to our relationship in present time. In this way we had many little meetings at the relational growing edge.

As I imagine sharing what I have written so far, my risk of possible over-exposure and shame has come more to the foreground. This is the relational growing edge between me and potential readers. I notice my own projections rising – voices from the past that
I have internalised and hear in the present. I am projecting these voices into present time because I haven’t yet had a new experience to replace the old, just as my client has not yet had new experiences to replace the old projections. I sit with my projections, feeling them weighing on me. What do I need to free myself? I reach out to make contact with someone in the email support group of peers who are engaged in a similar writing process. I receive a supportive response, and with this the balance between risk and support is restored.

Periodically P speaks of feeling dirty or disgusting. His words indicate a number of things: His shame is activated and held in a fixed gestalt; retroflection is implied, with a split between one part who says “You are dirty”, and one part who is on the receiving end of that statement; and supporting the whole system at a deep level is a ground introject, or a learned belief that was taken in early, telling him that part of his way of being is unacceptable in the field. In sharing something shameful like this, P was sending a mixed message, with elements of both wanting and not wanting to be seen. His words were in part an invitation for me to draw closer with him to the edge of shame and exposure. Unfortunately there were many times that I didn’t respond to his invitation. Sometimes I didn’t know in that moment how to respond, and perhaps my own out-of-awareness shame or disgust response prevented me from drawing closer and meeting him with open curiosity.

WORKING WITH TABOO SUBJECTS

In a recent session this changed. P told me he was seeing a middle-class woman and that he felt dirty and less-than with her. As I am probably perceived as a middle-class woman my first question was to ask him “And what about here? Do you feel that here?” “No, I do see you as middle-class, but our relationship is different.” “So it is possible to have a relationship with a middle-class woman without feeling dirty or less-than?” “The difference with this other woman is that I am sexually attracted to her, and I find I want to punish her sexually for being middle-class.” Our relational growing edge now included potentially taboo subjects around sexual practice.

As I write this, a memory is stirred up from my time as a trainee. I was discussing my work with a client and was asked, “But what did you do?” As I feel into this memory my chest tightens and I feel pressured to find words for my felt-sense of the experience. I feel pulled in two directions – split between finding suitable prefabricated words to describe what I do, or, staying with my overall sense of the experience, which is alive and unformed and is searching for a new form of expression. Much of ‘what I do’ as a psychotherapist is not easy to put into words. This is because drawing near the edge involves stepping forth from secure ground into.... whatever comes next. This ‘whatever’ is not known, can’t be known, and can’t be predicted, although it can be shaped by our behaviour. This is the true nature of the relational growing edge – the edge between now and what comes next. My client and I both have to leave some security behind in order to take this supported risk. This is what I want to write about – the gap between the security of now and what comes next.

When P shared with me that he felt ‘dirty and less than’ with a woman he is seeing, he was sharing with me more detail of his feeling of exposure and shame. What did I do? The first step was to attend to him by
checking out how much shame was activated right now between us. His answers let me know this wasn’t a live issue between us in this moment. It was more about ‘there-and-then’ than about ‘here-and-now’, so we were working with something at one remove. When he brought up the taboo subjects of sexual attraction and his desire to punish I was aware of his courage and trust in being able to voice these things. My natural response was to draw closer to him with open curiosity.

WHAT WENT ON BEHIND THE SCENES?

When P shared with me that he wanted to sexually punish a woman he is seeing for being middle-classed, my felt sense, my inner response went something like this:

I felt an opening up to curiosity, a heart opening. I felt honoured and respectful, like I was engaging a different gear of sensitivity - more sensitised, alive, alert. Much background support kicked in automatically. Some of this background support was in the form of intentions. My intention was to bring safety to this space, to protect the tender shoots emerging, to go slow enough, to engage fully. This intention of protection made the space safer. In this moment, I am remembering the feeling of safety growing and surrounding us, with judgments cleared away to create an open invitation. I wasn’t speaking aloud, but my intention was saying, “Give him space. This is important. This is a voice that needs to be heard.” I felt quite vigilant about pushing to one side anything extraneous for now, to allow this new voice to be heard. At the same time I was aware of protecting him from the glare of the spotlight; protecting against anything in me that might push too hard or be too inquisitive. My intention was to follow and support his pace – to meet him where he was in terms of pace and energy, as well as content. This was a minute-by-minute gauging of how much curiosity was the right amount – like constantly adjusting the tension on a guide rope – slightly tighter, slightly looser – and all the while looking at, feeling into, and sensing his responses to this – mostly in the energetic flow between us, not verbally. I checked for any response in me of fear, disgust, or needing to put on the brakes. I also checked into my sense of his experience. What I felt was a sense of heightened engagement from both of us. It’s not so much what I did externally, as the intentional and implicit boundaries that I engaged with that provided a safe enough space to continue.

This preparation that goes on behind the scenes is a drawing together of many threads that support me, my client, and the relationship between us. The action that emerged was an open exchange of views on safe sexual practice and all that entails. Over the years of working with both my clients’ and my own issues involving sexual practice I have become clear in my own mind about certain boundaries: the importance of sexual practice remaining within the law, that it must be consensual, that choices have consequences, and the safety of self and others is paramount. In the two-way discussion that followed we found common ground in our boundaries, and we agreed that within these boundaries, there is huge scope for variation and expression. The common ground made room for our differences and created a safe enough container for us to begin to explore the meaning of his experience. P felt safe enough to continue sharing with me, and I felt safe enough to remain genuinely open and curious.
I return to my process of writing, and I feel my anxiety rising. Another memory surfaces from my experience as a trainee. My tutor is saying, “Where are you in this writing?” I re-experience in dilute form what was once a tidal wave of excruciating shame washing over me. I feel smaller, unsure, fearful of getting it wrong – the opposite of feeling supported at the edge. In spite of some relational work around this with my tutor, I have introjected these words, and right now I feel them as a force from outside pressing in on me, weighing me down, making me feel smaller. My past experience is impacting on the present, as I project outwards onto potential readers. I take some deep breaths and return to the present time. I am no longer a trainee. The support I need in this moment is to be free of authoritarian figures, both internal and external. I need to have my internalised trainers and supervisors behind me, backing me up, but not calling the shots. There is a subtle difference between my allowing them to guide and steer me, and stepping into my own boat and charting my own course. For me to engage at this growing edge, I need both freedom and responsibility to take my own step into the unknown. I breathe deeply into this choice and the wave of shame turns into a wave of empowerment. I welcome it, let it wash over me, and I step forward with a different energy. My connection with my agency is restored and I feel supported to take the next step.

DEEPENING EXPERIENCE AT THE RELATIONAL GROWING EDGE

In the next session P expressed his desire to share a ‘dark secret’ from 15 years ago. He was clearly agitated and troubled. This was a big deal for him, and his fear was “You will see me differently. You will see me as dirty.” He was conflicted – wanting to blurt it out, but very apprehensive about doing so. We needed to assess whether there was enough support for this risk.

My physical response was strong: My awareness went to my chest, with a subtle tightening and bracing, as though my heart needed stronger fortification. I felt the need to bring in stronger protection for both of us, because of the increased potential for over-exposure and shame. My energy level was raised, as I asked myself, “Do I want to hear his dark secret? Am I supported enough to take this step?” We moved through the cycle to mobilisation and action more quickly, building on the previous week’s groundwork of safety and protection. At the same time I explicitly slowed down the pace, checking verbally about the level of safety he felt vs. the level of risk.

Whatever choice he made, it felt essential to give my honest reaction, my human response. I grappled with my fear of having my own shame or disgust stirred up, and I felt confident that this too could be part of the therapeutic mix. I saw in him both a struggling man in his 40s, as well as a young boy who never felt acceptance or unconditional care – a boy who had settled for crumbs. Whatever dark acts he wanted to share with me, this was part of a bigger picture. I brought to mind the innumerable times that I went to the edge of shame in my therapy, and my therapist stayed right there with me, making it a relational edge through her willingness to see whatever was to be seen, and not to judge or ridicule or be disgusted. So many times when my self-disgust was strong, she held the compassion. In this moment, what P was about to share was being held by something bigger than just me.

As I write this I feel a wave of nausea coming
up in me. Nausea, disgust – these responses have their place. They are not ‘bad’ or ‘wrong’ responses – they are human responses. I sometimes feel nauseous when a retroflection is being undone; either my own or a client’s. In this moment, my nausea feels related to the neglect that P experienced, when he was literally left in a dirty state and was too young to do anything about that. My nausea feels like a great big, “You make me sick!” to the people who were negligent in their responsibility. I am intentionally staying with my sensation right now, and not going into ‘thinking about’ parallel process, transference, or projective identification. My nausea is backed up by a rising anger. “This is not good enough. This young man deserves better. He deserves understanding, love and attention. He is not ‘dirty’, he is struggling to find meaning and expression in his life. He has a right to do this, and I stand by him in his exploration.”

We got to the point in the session where he could choose whether or not to share his secret with me; whether or not to step from the safety of what is known and secure in our relationship to the unknown of the ‘what next’. We both sized up the risk, individually and jointly, and I became clear that my role was to accompany him as he made the choice. He knew he had the option of backing away or stepping forwards. I had laid all the safety groundwork I could, and at this moment at the edge I was willing to go with him if he chose to step. I remained open and present and waited for him to choose.

During this writing process, my strong need emerged to have my internalised tutors and supervisors behind me, but not calling the shots. I chose to step into my own agency. Likewise, in this moment P needed to call the shots, to claim his own agency, to make his own choice, free from my influence.

He chose to step forward and he shared his dark secret with me. I won’t include details of the content here out of respect for his confidentiality, apart from saying that it had to do with viewing pornography. Taking that step together brought up many things for me, including relief, a belief that this was containable, and a release of pent-up energy. Mostly I felt a wave of compassion, and a desire to share my genuine human response, which I did. We had moved through full contact and were now on the other side, the crisis passed. I experienced the contact cycle as a big wave that we rode together – two surfers side-by-side, and we’d both survived and made it safely to the shore. I knew we were both okay, and I felt the strong satisfaction that follows joint enterprise.

I was aware of the potential for a shame backlash which can be present after exposure if there isn’t enough follow-up support. What I did was to bring in more context, the normalising of his experience, the commonality, and the fact that he hadn’t repeated this in 15 years. Also the fact that he could forgive others who had done the same, and that he deserved the same degree of forgiveness. In this way the field was transformed into something that supports rather than something that threatens.

CONCLUSION

In this article I’ve written about meetings at the relational growing edge with one client, not intended as a template, but as a description of one example. In the weeks that followed P and I built on these experiences, with new cycles of contact emerging, including further exploration of his sexual desires, thoughts, feelings and
practice. This area, so often taboo, has been brought out of the shadows of isolation, which can be a breeding ground for shame, and into relationship, where acceptance is a real possibility.

The work with projection, introjects and retroflection is deepening. In the most recent session P asked me what I saw in him – did I see any goodness? This was the first time he asked me that question outright, and I saw in him a softness and openness I’d not seen before. He was no longer stuck at one polarity, and it was becoming possible to tentatively explore the other side. I am hopeful that this ongoing deepening of our relationship will enable us to work more explicitly with the trauma responses that he lives with on a daily basis.

And what about my writing process? I shared my first draft with three peers/colleagues; people who know me in different contexts. Each of them gave different feedback that felt supportive and encouraging. My writing could have gone in a choice of directions. As I followed one thread where the advice to simplify my article struck a chord with me, a wave of sadness came up and my energy dropped. I noticed feeling smaller and weighed down, and the writing felt like hard work. I’d lost my sparkle and enthusiasm. This indicated that introjects were activated, and I was writing to someone else’s standard. I followed a different thread, a thread that involved more risk of exposure, of ‘getting it wrong’ and not having a polished enough final result. I reached out for support and was reminded of the ethos of this journal; that I am supported to take the first step; to be a bit braver in how I show up; to not lose my voice in going too far to accommodate others; and that writing here is an opportunity to ‘practice and hone my style’. As I returned to

the younger, unformed voice that I’ve included in this article, my energy flowed once again. I was on the right track, returning to that edge between safety and risk - the relational growing edge.

REFERENCES


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In this paper I will attempt to do several things in sequence in order to illuminate the essentially metaphorical nature of play in play therapy with children, even when it is described as symbolic. Initially, I must distinguish between symbol, definition, and metaphor. Secondly, I intend to examine the consequences for mistaking for symbol or definition what might be better construed metaphorically. Then I will attempt to apply these notions to the use of the terms symbolic and metaphorical in child-centered play therapy, and then child development theory. Finally, I will propose Gestalt therapy’s theory of self as having an essentially metaphorical character that might prove a more useful way of understanding health, healthy development, and well being.

One of the central tenets of play therapy as a form of psychotherapy for children is that in absence of the ability of a child to adequately express their experience and understanding of that experience in language—as presumably, an adult in “talk” psychotherapy would—play, often assumed to function “symbolically,” activates the same or similar mechanisms for change and healing. In other words, play therapy does what talk therapy does, just using the language of play, rather than speech. In this articulation, however, a careful ear hears a clang: because while the adult’s speech may be attended to by the psychotherapist as if it were metaphor (or so we hope), the child’s play is often assumed to be symbolic.

The distinction between these two terms is important because of how each takes up what might be called the “manifest” content of speech or play, and how it conceives of the relationship between what is said or played in relation to that which is “latent”—unspoken, unplayed, or, rather, present in its absence. Perhaps a convenient way of understanding this distinction is to make a pair of metaphors: symbolism is decoding; metaphor is translation. What I mean by this is that in a symbol, the latent term is more important than the manifest term—the manifest term points toward the latent, which is understood to be in some way “realer” in its absence than that which appears. The terms are organized hierarchically, or vertically.

This way of understanding the symbolic stretches all the way to its Greek roots, where a symbolon was a token—that which stands
in stead of and that which when it is thrown (bolon = to throw) brings with (syn-) it some certain, greater meaning\(^1\). To understand the symbol, you must know the code—what stands for what—otherwise you will poker chip after poker chip trying to retrieve a subway ride from a vending machine.

1. As an aside the significance of which will manifest a shadow later, it is important to point out that “symptom” has nearly the same root. A symptom is what “falls together”.

Meanwhile, the metaphor, also Greek word in origin, is “carried over” (meta- + pherein) from one term to the other, and is nearly equivalent to the Latin-rooted word “translation” (trans- + latus = carry over). The question is what is “carried across” in a translation or metaphor? If I translate a text from one language to another, I hope that the meaning of the text is carried (and here “meaning” includes something of intentional structure of that which is translated), but neither version of the text is “truer” or “realer” than the other. The translations refer to each other in a lateral way. This is also the case in metaphor, where the two terms appear in light of each other, without one ever replacing the other. To say “He is all pine and I am apple orchard,” as Robert Frost (1914) does in “Mending Wall,” is to say many things about “he” and “I” and “pine” and “apple orchard,” but never do any of those terms mean “more” than any other or cancel out any of the others\(^2\).

In other words, the meaning of a symbol is carried through the symbol, whereas the meaning of the metaphor is carried across the metaphor. When a symbol functions, it functions as a way of decoding or defining: it is a technological collapse of one thing to another, a kind of jargon. To say “the universe is a machine” and take that symbolically is to either denigrate the universe or elevate the machine, depending on which term you take to be a token for the other. To mean that same phrase as a definition (from Latin, de- + finis = “to bound completely”) is to suggest not only a collapse of one thing to another but to assume that one term bounds the other completely, so that nothing of the thing is omitted. These ways of managing knowledge-in-language certainly have their benefits (not the least of which is the sense of security that comes with feeling you have tidily wrapped something up), but they come at the cost of paradoxically perpetuating—on the one hand—dangerously simple beliefs about “how the world works” and—on the other hand—creating the necessity for and then fueling the perpetuation and growth of false and maddeningly involuted ways of thinking about the world that have no (or at best, insubstantial) basis in lived experience\(^3\).

Meanwhile metaphor—or taking up of what appear to be definitions and symbols as metaphor—offers us an alternative relationship between language and experience. Metaphor, by nature, entails its own incompleteness. The terms of “a statement understood as a metaphor” are, by definition, understood to be in an imperfect comparison. To say “I am apple orchard” is to simultaneously recognize that “I” am, in some ways, “apple orchard” and that in some other important ways I am very much not. The parts where the terms are not in comparison are (in most cases?) obvious, and the ways in which the comparison holds are in the manner of pointing toward some third, unspeakable thing, rather than being entirely self-evident. In a good metaphor, the comparison strikes the reader as entirely
apt, giving her a sense of something, which we often then attempt to describe—“How is it so that ‘I’ am ‘apple orchard’?”—and if we are very gifted or very lucky, perhaps we can come up with something like an answer that rings rather than clangs. But here too, the incompleteness of the metaphor winks at us, showing off its success in its failure. To take what is said or written as a metaphor—or to speak or write in metaphor—is to use language as curve and asymptote, forever approaching each other as they both approach infinity.

2. This is one of the central themes of “Mending Wall”—the human-in-language desire for one “meaning” to cancel out the other, missing the necessity of each meaning for the existence of the other.

3. This is what Heidegger (1927/1962) is referring to in part one of the Introduction to Being and Time when he discusses the science that has not “adequately clarified the meaning of Being” (p. 31). Symbolic and definitional thinking—resting upon an unexamined ontology—prepares the way for “crises” which require the construction and maintenance of a rickety and increasingly complex scaffolding to forestall the disintegration of “certain knowledge”.

4. Asymptote is from the Greek and means “not falling together.” A shadow is an echo, is a traced ghost.

5. $f(x) = \frac{1}{x}$, as graphed on a Cartesian coordinate plane, for example.

The metaphor requires the sustaining of the very tension between its terms that the symbol or definition aim to collapse. To return to the earlier example of a metaphor dangerously understood as a symbol or definition—“the universe is a machine”—we can see this in action. To try to take the universe as a machine in the definitional or symbolic sense is to attempt to resolve the tension that immediately arises as soon as we begin the project of seeing one entirely as the other, or seeing one through the lens of the other. To get the definition or symbol to work, we must manipulate the terms and force them into the kind of relationship we aim for them to have, and what is figural here is the manipulation of what is in order to fit what we already believe to be the case about the terms. All of this is done to resolve the tension between the terms, and therefore the larger tension that is revealed if we cannot manifest what we wish to be the case—an anxiety: what sort of world would it be were we unable to master our own language, much less the world with it?

Meanwhile, to take “the universe is a machine” as a metaphor is to begin with the premise that such a statement points beyond itself in its very incompleteness. The universe both is and is not a machine (the statement is true and false), and the tension that this realization creates is sustained or enhanced by a metaphorical understanding of the statement. The metaphor aims not to resolve this tension, but to use that tension to point toward what truth might be revealed beyond it. A poetic world, a metaphorical world, is no different than a symbolic or definitional one, but here we find the same question heard differently: what sort of world would it be were we unable to master our own language, much less the world with it?

Unlike the symbol, the metaphor is “in play”; it will not resolve itself and we cannot resolve it without turning it into a symbol or definition, taking with that move all of its ability to mean beyond what we can force it to, to take away its wildness. And it is here that we can return to thinking of the
“symbolic play” of children in play therapy with another set of eyes.

Keeping in mind that the same statement can be understood either as symbolic or metaphorical, and knowing that the same is true of any action that a child might take in play, the difference between symbolic and metaphorical play is in \textit{how} the play therapist understands what they witness, in \textit{what way} they hold the meanings they make of the child’s play, just as it is the case in our examples above. It has nothing at all to do with whether the child is playing symbolically or metaphorically—although categorizing play as symbolic suggests that there is an intent on the part of the child to show some thing through her play—and everything to do with the therapist's desire to understand the child in a certain way. Thinking of play as metaphorical requires the therapist to hold lightly the meanings they make from what they witness in a child's play, rather than, in an anxious drive for “certain knowledge,” wrestling this or that interpretation from play that is seen as symbolic.

To take a handy example, the words “symbol” and “symbolic” appear thirty times in Cochran, Nordling and Cochran’s \textit{Child-centered Play Therapy} (2010). The word “metaphor” also appears eleven times in the textbook, most often in Chapter 9, on role-play. However, whereas “symbol” and “symbolic” appear in conjunction with the concept of “symbolic play,” metaphor often appears preceded by the word “own”. Here are some samples:

- “...the child creates \textbf{his own} ‘technique’ or ‘metaphor’ for healing.” (Kindle Location 1471)
- “...role-play enhances the therapist-child relationship and allows children to create \textbf{their own metaphors} and lead the way.” (Kindle Location 4087)
- “...role-plays are the \textbf{child’s own metaphors} by which she begins to lead the way and create corrective experiences.” (Kindle Location 4099)
- “[the therapist] is also sensitive to Darin’s need to process on his own and be the one ‘in control’ of \textbf{his own metaphor} or story.” (Kindle Location 4122).

Certainly, this could all be coincidence. But the language here suggests that there's something peculiar about creating and controlling “their own metaphors.” Are children not often in control of their metaphors? And why are they not creating and controlling their own symbols? While there is a general emphasis in child-centered play therapy theory on the child’s ownership, control and directing of her own experience, my conjecture is that the discrepant use of the terms “symbol” and “metaphor” belie the way these two concepts are understood in child-centered play therapy, and perhaps in play therapy more generally.

It would seem that for Cochran, Nordling and Cochran (2010) a symbol is given (rather than made) and that the meanings of symbols are fixed; no one has to “create their own.” In contrast, metaphors are created and owned by their makers—suggesting that \textit{the meaning of metaphor is in play}. Symbols are made by no one and their meaning can be known to anyone who can decode what a symbol represents, what it is a token for. In this way, neither the child nor the therapist makes anything new, and so long as the therapist is able to decode what is really meant by the child’s play, the child can be known and interpreted through her
symbols. This thinking runs counter to the child-centered play therapy focus on the child finding her own way, which is perhaps why Cochran, Nordling and Cochran (2010) turn to metaphor when creation, ownership and moving into the unknown are uppermost in their thoughts. This would certainly be the case in role-play (the chapter where most references to metaphor appear), an activity that requires the therapist to be comfortable accepting an active role in the child’s metaphorical play—suddenly the therapist is very obviously inside the child’s play, a participant at the direction of the child. It is no longer possible to ignore the experimental nature of the situation. While such a relationship is more in keeping with the theoretical aim of child-centered play therapy to allow the child and her metaphors their own autonomy, it presses the therapist’s anxiety for knowing and aim of treatment. Such an anxiety is not unique to the therapist, but it is in the therapist’s anxiety that we can see the shadow of the source of the child’s need for a space in which to create and own her metaphors. What sort of world would it be were we unable to master our own language, much less the child with it?

This anxiety of certainty is, of course, pervasive in our culture. It isn’t as if child-centered play therapists are the only people who’ve tried to find a way to master it through an obscurity of language and meaning. They are among the many inheritors of a long lineage looking to know a certain thing through an argument that has ceased to have any anchor in experience (if it ever did) and which evaporates under the slightest gaze. However, as our child-rearing practices are at least nominally based in the same developmental models that inform the theories of play therapy with children, and those practices, models and theories are pinned to a particular metaphor about the self, it is in our interactions with children that we first perpetuate upon them our anxiety about certainty.

One of the threads that holds together the developmental models of Dewey, Freud, Erikson and Piaget is a cycle by which the child establishes a state of equilibrium within herself that is then disturbed when the child encounters or is called forth into a new stage in her development (Mortola, 2001). At this point, the child finds herself in a state of disequilibrium that is then resolved or re-balanced by meeting the demands of the current developmental stage, at which point the child finds herself again in a state of equilibrium until the entire cycle begins again. Dewey wrote of a “temporary falling out,” Freud of “states of tension,” Erikson of “developmental crises” (all quoted in Mortola, 2001, p. 54), and Piaget that “all development is composed of momentary conflicts and incompatibilities which must be overcome to reach a higher level of equilibrium” (1964, p. 33). In every case, an achieved balance is disturbed and then eventually reestablished, with the child progressing to a new, and more advanced developmental stage.

There are echoes here of the conflict we have been describing all along: with a resolution of one stage into another, the child progresses along a path toward becoming an adult. Each moment of disequilibrium is symbolized, collapsed to and caught up in a representation of the greater project of the development of a self. We have already discussed the dangers of a metaphor taken for a symbol, and here again is an opportunity to re-evaluate our language. If these developmental models are taken to
be definitional or symbolic, the health of a child is measured against the implicit values of these models, and the steady progression of a self through these checkpoints. It is assumed that there is a self which progresses, and that with the resolution of each stage, a child is closer to some fulfillment. From this vantage point, play must be symbolic, a part of this development of self that is pushed or pulled toward some outcome.

Metaphorical play requires a metaphorical understanding of the self that is playing, which is to say an understanding of self that does not attempt to resolve the crises of development toward some end, but believes those tensions and ruptures are a part of the nature of the self, or perhaps even the location at which the self is seen. In other words, a metaphorical understanding of self, and therefore development, is one in which the world to which the self belongs, as the other term of the relationship, is equiprimordial with the self, a partner in the unresolvable tension of being, rather than merely an environment through which one moves.

A useful model of this is Gestalt therapy, with its idiosyncratic understanding of self as the tension at the boundary between what is experienced as “inside” and “outside” of “me”—“I” am at the junction, so to speak (Wheeler, 1994). This process-at-the-boundary called self (sometimes also called the “contact boundary”) is constantly finding, losing, and re-establishing equilibrium, similar to the manner described in the major theories of development. One difference, however, is that this process called self is ongoing, life-long, and not progressive. The self is continually responding to the environment through “creative adjustments” so that the contact boundary is constantly maintained through tension: it can never resolve itself or be resolved. From this point of view, self is metaphorical, and is articulated through play and everything else that a child might do. Even as adults, because the process or tension at the boundary called self is “in play” and unresolved, our actions are best understood as metaphorically, rather than symbolically, meaningful. They open, rather than foreclose, possibilities.

For this reason, all Gestalt therapy is play therapy, regardless of whether it is done with children or adults or whether a sand tray is in the room. The process of gestalt therapy as a play therapy is the bringing into awareness the possibilities for play at the contact boundary, and the cultivation of a range of responses to environmental demands. This is done through experiment: curiously playing in the world with another (Wheeler, 1994, p. 4). Play here, like metaphor, is not “outcome oriented”—which would require the resolution of meaning and symbolization of experience—but rather attends to the intersubjective process of learning to both know ourselves and how to know ourselves simultaneously (Wheeler, 1994, p. 4). Health and well being, in Gestalt (play) therapy, is the facility one has for playing at the contact boundary and the continuing development of maximal free play there. The metaphor in play—and the play in metaphor—is the self-process unfolding.

To mistake a metaphor for a symbol has dangerous consequences because it perpetuates certainty where there is none. To be able to hold meaning lightly, and to respond with relative flexibility to the demands seems a far healthier thing to be
able to do than to futilely attempt to know with certainty. This is as true for therapists as it is for poets or mathematicians, parents as well as children. If one aim in our working with children is to understand them, it would be most useful to meet them on the terms of their own metaphors, regardless of the anxiety that inspires in us, rather than to attempt to know them through our symbols. And if we furthermore wish to encourage healthy development in the people we work with, regardless of their age, we must ourselves be able to recognize the usefulness of certain lies and prisons that others entail, so that we may then meet our patients in the play of possibilities, in the metaphor of being.

REFERENCES


John Verbos is completing his PhD in clinical psychology at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and will defend his doctoral dissertation, “Non-symbolic Exact Quantity Representation in a Language-Impaired Population,” in the spring of 2018. He is currently an intern with the Albany Psychology Internship Consortium in Albany, New York, where he provides individual and group psychotherapy in both clinical outpatient and inpatient settings. John has trained in gestalt therapy at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, and has recently joined its faculty. He also has an extensive writing and teaching background, having taught psychology, literature, philosophy and writing at the high school and university level since 2001. John earned an MFA in creative writing in 2002, and is a published and anthologized author of short fiction.
Being a trainee Gestalt therapist with an academic background in theology and religious science my main interest lies in the intersection of religion and psychotherapy. I am willing to find out more about the role that religion could play in therapy and what are the core differences between religious and therapeutic practice (it turns out, rather unexpectedly, the two can at times appear quite indistinguishable). Another question is whether religious insights can inform my therapeutic work and vice-versa – has my therapy practice had any influence on the way I practice my religion? What are the risks and obvious challenges? Is there anything in our famously “anti-religious” Gestalt tradition that would support such religiously tainted inquiries? And what do I do with my religious identity within the framework of secular Gestalt practice when “bracketing” just doesn’t seem to be honest enough either for me or the client?

These questions have largely grown out of my private experience which, I believe, will sound familiar to all those who ascribe certain value to the religious part of their personality. The issue I’m about to touch upon concerns the uneasy notion of disclosing one’s religious inclinations in a secular therapy room, and the equally uneasy task of being a religious therapist in a secular institution. This means not only being a more open and therefore authentic therapist in a dialogue with a client but also deals with approaching religious content should a client reveal it. I will share two episodes from my personal experience which involve religious disclosures, both of which differ in terms of the therapist’s reaction. These episodes will serve to illustrate two common scenarios of how therapists tend to react to clients’ religiousness. I will call them the “Suspicious” and “Sympathetic” models, respectively. After having discussed how and why both of these reactions can be disturbing to clients as they form an obstacle in the therapeutic alliance, it will then be the aim of this paper to see if Gestalt therapy has something more meaningful to offer for those of us who are
religiously inclined, and dare to stay that way, despite (or, rather, because of) their role as a Gestalt therapist or client.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

First some terms and background information should be provided. I will begin with the latter. The context and background of my work is first of all defined by geography – I am located in Latvia, one of the former Soviet Bloc countries in Eastern Europe. Even though the term “Eastern Europe” can be quite a fuzzy one, especially taking into account the vast geography and myriad of nations and cultures it attempts to cover, there is a certain truth to the observation made by Thomas Grob: “Everyone who has visited Eastern Europe knows there is something like the European East” (Grob, 2017). This “European East” or, in more contemporary terminology, European “Other” with its post-soviet experiences as well as pre-war intellectual heritage, is where my Gestalt practice comes into being. It might be helpful to keep this in mind if some of the questions I am proposing sound uneasy, if not downright uncomfortable, to the ears of Western practitioners.

However, finding myself at home within a particular religious institution has never been an easy task. Having drifted away from my Sunday school faith early in my teens disappointed and angry at the hypocrisy experienced within the safe and outwardly saintly walls of my private Christian school, and having tried for a brief and confused period to find myself in meditation, Buddhist chanting, vegetarianism, yoga, new age and esoteric practices, I finally returned home to the Catholic Church in my early twenties. However, at one point the local church got so involved in politics and a debate on certain human rights issues, that I just started worshipping with the local Anglican community which was then led by my Oxford educated tutor from the Faculty of Theology. It felt like the right change and currently I am still a practicing member of the Anglican Church in Riga.

The second major figure important in the context of this paper concerns my religious background. I belong to a small but vibrant Anglican worship community based in Riga, and would describe my faith as falling somewhere along the Anglo-Catholic lines – feeling greatly attached to the richness of church tradition but not content with the authority of the Pope and Vatican based bureaucracy. There has always been a component of such struggle in my faith journey between the beauty of heavenly ideas and rather questionable if not downright corrupt earthly interpretations. I have never experienced serious doubts about God as I have experienced being lead by His providence throughout the various twists and turns of my life experiences. Moreover, I completely agree with St Gregory of Nazianzus, a 4th century saint, who described humans as “deified animals” – in the final analysis it is the existential questions we are so desperately seeking answers to (this corresponds closely with observations from existential branches of psychotherapy, and it would be apt to remember that should Laura Perls have got her way, Gestalt would today be known as Existential therapy).

The community I worship with is formed both by foreign nationals residing here, and locals whom for various reasons have left their traditional denominations. As in my case, their reasons mostly have to do with
the ultra-conservative attitudes of Latvian Lutheran and Catholic churches. This is why our community has a strong humanitarian ethos, focusing on radical inclusivity and educated theological enquiry. So far we are the only church in Latvia served by a woman pastor and supporting equal rights for gay people. All of this forms the backdrop to how I approach my role and mission of being a member of wider society – or, in terms of Gestalt vocabulary, my approach to interacting with my environment.

One of the main focus points of my interaction is my practice as a Gestalt therapist. I came to Gestalt after finishing undergraduate studies in theology when I realized that I was far too practically inclined to be an academic theologian, but too free-thinking for a career within church structures. So I found psychotherapy as most similar in substance, if different in vocabulary, to the mission of every Christian person to become an “authentic and true person” and to help others to achieve the same. The Gestalt branch of therapy was a pure coincidence (or providence, depending on one’s mode of thinking), as it was one of the few recognized training institutions in Riga. However, Gestalt led me quite naturally to work in the field of behaviorally challenged adolescents – a population I feel rather familiar with and sympathetic with due to my own life experiences, and sufficiently challenging to serve me as a constant reminder of the great limitations and shortcomings I have as a therapist.

Currently my work takes place in two contexts. One is my private practice where I see up to 6 clients a week – both adult and adolescent with a range of difficulties, from smoking cessation to depressive disorders. The other is being a project director for an Adolescent behavioral health unit with the Children’s Hospital Foundation in Latvia. This project is currently in its development stage and will be targeted at children and adolescents with addictive behavior disorders. One of the things I am dealing with is searching for new ways to integrate Gestalt practice within the clinical framework of adolescent therapy where certain religion-based interventions (mindfulness, for example) have already proven to be largely effective.

SPIRITUALITY, RELIGION AND MENTAL HEALTH

As attested by a number of textbooks and research articles spirituality within the mental healthcare framework has received a growing academic and public attention. The Oxford Textbook of Spirituality in Healthcare (2012) is a prominent example following earlier studies by Gillian White (Talking about spirituality in healthcare practice, 2008), Kliever and Saultz (Healthcare and spirituality, 2005) and Puchalski (The role of spirituality in health care, 2001). Although most of these studies focus on criticizing the limited role spirituality plays in the western scientific medical model, a trend of growing demand or at least interest from medical professionals can also be observed. Manuals for the assessment of spiritual needs are being published in growing numbers, the latest among which is a handbook specifically devoted to assessing the spirituality of children (Assessing and Communicating the Spiritual Needs of Children in Hospital, 2016). Also, this trend is clearly showing in the number of guidebooks introducing doctors to a variety of spiritual backgrounds and experiences their patients might have but
which till recently have been largely ignored in clinical settings. The Essential Guide to Religious Traditions and Spirituality for Health Care Providers (2013) and World Religions for Healthcare Professionals (2017) are two such examples.

Gestalt, although in somewhat limited manner, has proved to be no exception to this trend. In one of the latest collections of contemporary Gestalt thinking there is a separate chapter devoted to Gestalt and spirituality (Philipp, 2012). The seminar day of the British Gestalt Journal in 2016 was devoted to Non-ordinary States of Consciousness – a spiritual subject if there ever was one. A collection of writings dedicated solely to the spiritual experiences of Gestalt practitioners has been published by an Australian publishing house (O’Neil, 2013), while a Gestalt community based around principles of Christian spirituality has been founded in the USA (“Welcome to Gestalt Pastoral Care”, 2017). Even though it is true that Gestalt, for various reasons, has been more comfortable with integrating spirituality of an Eastern variety, it is nevertheless clear that there is a renewed interest from the Gestalt community in all things spiritual, monotheistic religions included.

As a reader more familiar with debates around spirituality will have undoubtedly noticed, up till now I have used the terms “spiritual” and “religious” rather interchangeably. It surely reflects the tendency of academia and practitioners to do exactly this, but I would like to state my objections to such careless terminology. Therefore some working definitions should be provided. Spirituality, as demonstrated by John Swinton, is something which lately “has seen a major upsurge of interest within the Western world” (Swinton, 2001). This term can include a vast variety of worldviews, practices and ideologies which deal with “spiritual” themes but are disconnected from traditional religious institutions. It is characterized by diversity, individuality, non-conformity and highly individualistic practices.

Religion, on the other hand, is what is practiced within the framework of traditional religious institutions. It is communal in nature and can be said to be characterized by comparatively high levels of authority, a set of writings recognized as holding a special value for the community, and rather high reliance on tradition. It has to be noted that religion, as opposed to spirituality, has seen a sharp decline in membership across Europe. (However, the opposite is true in many other parts of the world). My context, as a member of a Christian church community, is first of all religious. Therefore, wherever I speak of spirituality it is meant only in the context of organized religion.

As I have noted there has been plenty of research devoted to the topic of spirituality within mental health and therapeutic settings, but I will not refer to it here. My main interest is to contextualize the relationship between a practitioner of organized religion and Gestalt therapy. It is my conviction, largely based on private experiences, that this area has been largely neglected. It can even be claimed that in many quarters of Gestalt, organized religion has been met with a certain hostility. This could partly be due to the slightly eastern spiritual and libertine character of the early Gestalt movement, but in most part it simply reflects the secular attitudes prevalent in
contemporary western post-Christian society. Of course, the highly questionable behavior of quite a few church officials which has gained immense publicity in recent years has also contributed to strengthening these negative projections.

Nevertheless, organized religion still serves as a source of immense inspiration for its practitioners and is shaping the worldview of millions around the world. It is hardly imaginable how an authentic relationship could be established with these fellow human beings without being able to navigate their religious landscape. Even more importantly, how can I become an authentic Gestalt practitioner, both as a client and therapist, being open with my clients about what I am bringing – even if implicitly – into the sacredness of therapy room. And how can I help them to tap into these vast resources which I know from my own experience can sometimes provide guidance, peace of mind and light in which to walk through the darkest of valleys. Especially, in those cases when everything else appears to have failed.

**Experience #1**

*It is my first ever visit to a psychotherapist. I am in my early twenties, sort of well functioning, on my way to getting a good education and already a published fiction writer. However, some issues I've been struggling with since my teens are slowly taking their toll on me, and I am eager to find help before it's too late.*

*The therapist is a well known figure in the local therapeutic community. Our conversation sets off on a promising note. He seems genuinely interested and very professional. Up to the point where he asks me about my studies. “I am studying theology,” I say, and all at once notice his eyebrows go up. He begins questioning me about my involvement in church life and wants to know if I have seriously considered celibacy. The sex scandals in the Catholic Church have been on TV a lot lately. I explain that studying theology does not equal becoming a catholic priest, and that my interest is mainly academic. He seems relieved. “As long as you don't get too involved in all that,” he tells me as if granting acceptance, “I think there isn't any problem with you being religious. If it helps you somehow.” Needless to say, I never returned.*

This is a typical model of reaction a client or patient can expect when sharing his religious inclinations with a mental health practitioner. I would like to call it the “Suspicious Model”, since the therapist interprets such a disclosure as a red-warning light and feels his inquiry should be targeted at detecting any possible signs of serious mental health conditions or imminent threats to the wellbeing of the client (for example, cult-like brainwashing). In other words, the client's disclosure makes the therapist suspicious of some underlying danger. He then makes it his immediate task to work on this hypothesis, and it is up to the client to either calm his therapist down or be labeled as too “mental” for Gestalt and get a referral to see a medical practitioner. Hardly a promising start for entering into a trustful therapeutic relationship.

It should be noted here that such a reaction on the therapists side is easily understandable. I would even say it is expected. After all, training in religious expression is non-existent in most psychotherapy programs, not even to mention psychology or medical education. There is however plenty of training on recognizing psychosis complimented with a general distrust of religion which prevails in
scientifically minded social environments. I remember one lesson vividly from my training where we were strictly instructed to detect any signs of possible mental derangement in a client during a first session. If anything seemed or sounded suspicious we were advised to send such client to see a psychiatrist. Especially when we were just starting on our careers and didn’t have much experience yet. Better play on the safe side. It is hard not to agree, since severe mental health disturbances often do have a religious content. However, such cases account for an extreme minority, and to create discomfort for the “healthily religious” client by subjecting them to such “suspicious” inquiries is certainly a much more probable danger.

**Experience #2**

I have recently made a bold decision about my future life and enrolled in a Gestalt training institute. My career is going well, I have just got a degree in Theology, and feel ready to take a new step. So I begin seeing a Gestalt therapist in order to acquire the necessary hours of private therapy. He also happens to be a teacher at the institution I will be studying at – a well respected local authority. “So, religion seems to mean a lot for you,” he says after my brief introduction. “Well, I am a believer too!” He points to his bookshelf where I notice several Orthodox Christian icons, a catholic rosary and a laughing Buddha. “I don’t go to any church or anything,” he adds. “But I believe in God, so I think I understand you.” I have no idea what sort of belief he has in mind, but it certainly doesn’t sound like anything I would understand by that term. I have a feeling those multi-faith artifacts are there simply for clients like me, and there is a thought in my mind that he probably has a copy of Watch Tower stacked somewhere in case I turned out to be a Jehovah Witness. Of course, I say nothing and keep coming back for nearly two years. He turns out to be quite helpful as a therapist. But I never speak to him about anything which involves my religious expressions and experiences. And that is quite a large part taken out of my life.

This model is becoming increasingly popular in client-therapist relationships and I will call it “Sympathetic”. Religion is no longer seen as a malaise but one more figure among others which can be explored and possibly used for the benefit of alliance building. At least partly this trend can be attributed to the popularity of mindfulness exercises which for many, especially the non-religious, are seen as “spiritual” practices. Of course, a growing amount of literature devoted to this subject, as noted before, has also contributed to a more sympathetic attitude both in therapy rooms and clinical settings.

There is no denying that from a client’s perspective sympathy feels way more comfortable than suspicion. I have no doubt that for many this exact amount of religious interest and acceptance would ensure a safe passage to further alliance building. However, there will be many clients for whom the opposite will be the case. Only the most liberal of Catholics would interpret seeing a rosary right next to a Buddha statue as a genuine expression of their Christian faith. Not to speak of the Orthodox believer for whom even such a statement as being religious but not going to church might sound like a joke or gross misunderstanding. So even though the therapist himself might be at home with broadly spiritual worldviews showing acceptance to most traditions and expressions, extreme care should be taken not to confuse “spiritual” with “religious”. For those who are spiritual, going to church, observing guidelines or following certain
rules might not seem necessary. For those who are religious, it is what defines their spirituality.

This undoubtedly can create some confusion for those uninvolved in religious life or practices. It will likely not be as clear cut and well articulated for most religious clients themselves. Only a very small minority of practitioners will have received any serious religious training, and even less will be trained theologians. For those of us who are, it is rather simple – from the theological standpoint faith cannot be exercised anywhere else apart from within the church. Everything we believe in can only find its proper expression in the church community which is guided by tradition and experience accumulated over several thousands of years. Spirituality is but one part of this common experience. Simply speaking, Christianity makes no sense outside the church.

Therefore we take any detached forms of spirituality to be something of a misguided superstition or naive obsession of popular culture.

For most lay believers, who form the vast majority of the religious population, this may be a less theological rooted but an equally sensitive area of their personality. Many will feel great attachment to their particular church as a community they have been a part of for most of their lives. For many, especially in Orthodox traditions, religious identity overlaps with national or ethnic identities, and some people find great assurance in the structure and maybe even the control that being part of a religious institution imparts on their lives. Disrespect, ignorance or misunderstanding of religious expressions can therefore be perceived as disrespect of ethnicity, nationality, family, personal history and as a threat to personal identity in general. Therefore it is likely to cause major upset which might appear out of proportion to the uninitiated or merely spiritual.

**TOWARDS A NEW MODEL**

The question here remains – what approach could be taken with a client who is religious and not displaying any obvious signs of psychotic disturbance? And is there any other role for religion in therapy apart from being an alliance building or (as is more commonly the case) destroying factor? I would like to suggest that Gestalt provides a promising signpost here. More specifically, the renowned Gestalt researcher Philipp Brownell might have a lot to contribute to this discussion.

Brownell, who is a trained clinician, Gestalt practitioner and also ordained minister, has offered the term “pneumatic field” (pneuma meaning spirit in ancient Greek) to describe work with religious content. It should be remembered here that in Christian theology Spirit is one of the three personal aspects of the Divine, and it is thought that Spirit interacts, inspires, leads and guides believers in their lives and communal expressions. Therefore it is in creative activity and direct personal experiences that the workings of Spirit can be observed in everyday settings. Brownell might have borrowed this idea from the prominent 20th century protestant theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg, but that is not what interests us here. As Brownell (2010) defines it, the Pneumatic field in Gestalt is a certain way of looking and interpreting the field, mainly by seeing it as a contact between the person and his or her spiritual self:
If “self” is an emergent property of contact in one’s environment, then understanding one’s spiritual self comes from contact with God in the pneumatic field. A person must develop the spiritual attitude that organizes his or her interests, perceptions, needs, experiences, and curiosities in such a way as to find God in the world where others, operating with a natural or unspiritual attitude, find no God at all.

It is important to note here that for religious clients it is only through these phenomenological encounters within the Pneumatic field that significant reorganization of the functions of Self can be experienced. As such, the Pneumatic field could be interpreted as a specific part of the general field similar to cultural, organic and other domains, yet bearing most significance, value and resources for the religious client. Therefore it is this part of the field to which most attention should be devoted as it is the part most ripe for potential. I would call such an approach the “Pneumatic Model”, which implies that whatever figure comes forward it will be seen by the therapist in its relation to the field of the spiritual.

This can be a scary experience for both therapist and client. After all, it means working within a framework where the usual laws and regularities might be non-existent. But as we can see, it is only in this pneumatic field that a religious person can find his or her true self. Such a proposition begs the question as to whether this kind of journey can be taken in the therapy room at all?

The metaphor which comes to mind here is from a movie “Stalker” (1979) by legendary Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky. Stalker is a guide who leads the way for brave explorers through a dangerous area known as the Zone in order to find a specific room where all wishes come true. What is of great importance here is that Stalker and his clients can have very different worldviews and interests. But it is this mission they take together that turns out to be the most uniting experience. This certainly sounds a lot like Gestalt therapy. And even though Stalker is familiar with the Zone from having been there before, he warns his clients that it is ever changing and appears to be living a life of its own. However, at the same time Stalker admits: “it is what we’ve made it with our condition. Everything that’s going on here depends not on the Zone, but on us” (Tarkovsky, 1979).

This could serve as an encouragement both for the religious client and the non-religious therapist. Even though a reasonable knowledge of religious territory from a therapist is to be expected, the pneumatic field does in a sense “depend on those involved in the process”. After all, it is organized by Spirit and therefore ever changing and dynamic. As Christians believe, one of the functions of the Spirit is to guide us on the right path to transformation of Self into a more true and authentic person – the ultimate goal, which religion shares with Gestalt. Maybe the ancient prayer: “Come Holy Spirit, guide our minds with your light” could be an apt beginning for such sessions.

Of course, the concept of the “Pneumatic model” would need a lot of serious work and further elaboration to provide a satisfactory working manual. For one thing, the concept of Self needs to be revisited for such an approach to be employed in practice. The Self cannot be just “an emergent property of contact in one’s environment” since this
would not account for the spiritual aspect of self which is understood theologically to be an evolving, yet permanent and indissoluble structure. This is where Gestalt theory could benefit from interdisciplinary efforts involving psychology, theology and the philosophy of mind. The Gestalt theory of Self in relation to the Pneumatic Model is an area I am working on right now in my doctoral research.

Another potentially problematic area involves maintaining healthy boundaries in the therapy room. Shared religious experiences, institutional memberships and dogmatic preferences may all provide additional challenges to the integrity of therapy. But for now I will suggest that it is exactly the religion itself which sets appropriate boundaries within which therapeutic work can unfold. Religion, just like other sociological constructs, can be seen as a language of signs and symbols. As such it provides a safe ground and defined borders to what can be considered “proper religious expression”. It is within this language that answers can be found as to what should be excluded from this tradition and therefore needs to be reinterpreted in the language of either a different tradition or a mental health condition. Of course, this also means that the therapist would require at least a working knowledge of a particular religious language.

As we have just seen the idea of bringing a particular religious tradition into Gestalt therapy proposes some obvious challenges: from ethical restrictions to professional and even theological implications. So while it is clear that our Gestalt community together with the wider mental health field is calling for greater integration of religion and spirituality in therapeutic work, this tendency largely deals with showing simple respect to the spirituality of clients. However, Gestalt provides us with much more. A “Pneumatic model” can not only be a way of fostering fundamental change in religious clients but also the only safe and meaningful way for Gestalt therapists to work within a field where figures might not have any meaning outside of a particular religious framework. If things don’t speak our language, the language we are accustomed to, they stop having any meaning. But Stalker offers us comfort: “For everything in the end has its own meaning... Both the meaning and the cause.”

REFERENCES


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The terrain of BDSM and divergent sexualities is little talked about within our Western culture and within gestalt particularly. This article is a first attempt at populating this field. I choose to write from personal experience in spite of the risks I am aware I am taking to my professional life and reputation in owning a draw towards BDSM. I believe in this regard that the profession has changed in recent years and is far more open now than it may once have been. And conversely the extent to which I will be projected on to, and this thematic material made ‘other’ and not owned, is precisely the extent to which the profession still needs to change.

I am aware of the vast amount of shame and vulnerability I feel in relation to this – shame is both the source of my draw towards master/slave sex, and is compounded by the fact that I go there. In this short piece I try not to theorise, however I hope my writing speaks to the importance of our being able to talk about BDSM in therapy and in gestalt settings, since I believe that when clients do talk about BDSM they may not be speaking only about sex and sexuality, but also finding a surrogate language for those deep aspects of self that need BDSM to find expression.

It is my thesis that I am also speaking about aspects of field and self that have resonance in some way with all of us – the challenge to the gestalt world is to be able to resonate enough from our own processes that these aspects of ‘isolated’ self can be re-accommodated within a relational, co-emergent reality – the burden of BDSM and what it stands for can be shared out a little more (and so lessened).

DEFINING TERMS

BDSM is the preferred term used by Langdrige and Barker (Eds. 2007) to mean sadomasochism. They use it in a wide sense intended to “include all sexual identities
involving pain play, bondage, dominance and submission and erotic power exchange” (ibid. p.11). It is important to note that these terms and practices are distinctive, and may or may not be practiced together. Where I locate myself and much of what follows is oriented towards only a small section of the experience that comes within this broader domain.

**MY HISTORY**

Eight years ago when I first sought out therapy the only thing that turned me on was master/slave sex, in the role of a slave. My therapist suggested that when I presented I was at the point a therapist of a more analytic persuasion might have labelled ‘crisis point’. There was more going on than that which manifested sexually. I had struggles in my work life, compassion and self-compassion were alien terms, I had some big unresolved issues with my parents, and I knew on some level that my sexual inclinations were not likely to bring me satisfaction.

My therapy, and the various workshops and trainings I have engaged in, have supported me to build more of a rounded sense of self – a self that is co-existent with ‘other’, and that I experience in relationship to, and as emergent of, my field. I may write a subsequent article about how therapy and group work have helped me to get to this point. My focus in this article is more present tense, about the challenges of integrating residual aspects of self that I have mostly split off and kept at arm’s length within a master/slave persona or fantasy.

Despite all my growth and change, in five and a half years of therapy I was never quite able to bring the slave identified part of me fully into the therapy room. My experience was of holding the slave ‘part’ close to my chest because (if I say out loud what is in my head) “it is only a master who can understand my all pervading sense of guilt and shame”. This speaks to really vulnerable aspects of attachment processes that can seem to require the specific transactional nature of a master/slave relationship to be held safely. The master is inviting emotions to the contact boundary that typically make one feel weak – ‘guilt’, ‘shame’, a sense of being ‘pathetic’ or ‘worthless’, ‘a faggot’. The redemptive opportunity offered is that through accepting one’s place in the hierarchy, and serving the Master one can be known and loved. It is electric stuff – that I want, and (the eroticisation of it) I need.

From my experience and reading on the subject, sexuality is often an arena where vulnerable aspects of ourselves like this get played out. However in thinking about how to be with clients who have a draw towards aspects of BDSM it is particularly important to stress that what is happening in the sexual arena is always a part of a wider field. In my case I know that I am more likely to end up in what I call a slave ‘headspace’ when there is something I find difficult to face, or hold, in my wider field. It is as if a boundary I had been holding suddenly breaks like a dam and I have found a way of turning my energy away from my field – often from challenges at work – and towards an energised place of meeting with a master. And in observing this about myself I am careful not to generalise my experience to that of other people – nor to imply that acting on master/slave inclinations is always an escape or is pathological. It is a creative adjustment that does not always support me in my life now. BUT (and this is my key offering), BDSM
– both the enactment of it and the act of talking about it – is the language (embodied and verbal) that I have found for grappling with my need for greater support than I am yet able to access from my field. I also imagine the way I inhabit BDSM (as a slave) speaks something to the particular nature of my embodied experience – a felt sense of my impotence, or smallness, a difficulty exerting myself on some embodied level. If I try to make sense of why I might experience a call towards this kind of sex, I see it as standing for ways of experiencing myself that I habitually split off because otherwise I feel too unbearably weak. The fantasies of being a slave sit as an omnipresent shadow to my preferred self-image of strength and independence – they constantly threaten to call out and expose my ‘lie’: they remind me of my powerlessness and relational needs. The further I have got in my therapy training, bizarrely – (or perhaps not), the harder it has been to allow myself to go into master/slave space. This is in large part due to my greater sensitisation to not only my own experience at the contact boundary, but to the field itself. As I wrote in a previous draft:

“I see myself as being made from the same stuff as other people. When I engage in ‘power play’ (or contemplate it) for example licking another man’s feet as a sign of submission, I feel the weight of the contact boundary disturbance I am inviting as a ‘warping of my field’. My act is not just about me: it extends to the boundary violation I am inviting of the other. I feel a heaviness, my body objects.”

I hear in this stance a fair amount of gestalt orthodoxy: a gestalt approach invites an aesthetic rather than a moral response to psychological manifestations like BDSM (e.g. Bloom 2003). And yet I wonder to what extent I might have taken this message in as an unhelpful introject against my exploring myself and my sexuality further. I find this terrain brings up complex and contradictory responses in me – on the one hand opening myself to master/slave space seems to hold the potential for an integration, on the other hand for whatever reason, whether introjected or not, I struggle to inhabit this aspect of my sexuality – to act from it. So I come up against an impasse where the fantasy is ever present, it is lodged in my sexual being, and yet I get by in the world largely by cutting off from this need, or from whatever it is calling my awareness to. Contrapuntally in those moments where my heart expands with enough felt sense of connection and support for me not to want to go into master/slave space, the erotic opportunity has not yet presented itself – I have not been able to open my heart for sufficient lengths of time to forge a link between heart and groin.

**BDSM AND GESTALT**

There is a fair amount in gestalt theory and wider therapeutic literature that talks somewhat negatively (and certainly reductively) about BDSM. For example Goodman (PHG 1951/1994) interprets sadomasochism as “the self exercising a fixed hostility against itself” – turned inwards in masochism, and turned outwards towards some external ‘object’ with which it identifies in sadism. The logic of this is that the master (sadist) loves the slave because the slave (masochist) stands for the “shut off” part within the master which he both shuns and loves as if as a part of himself.

Goodman goes on to make the argument
that the masochist erroneously believes that the sadist holds the potential to release him or her from their dammed up pain, without awareness that they themselves are the agent of the damming (or the holding in). Here I am guilty as charged: this argument makes sense of what I might be doing, in using a longing for something held in the idea of a master to simultaneously desensitise myself to the possibility of receiving sufficiently stimulating contact outside of this fantasy. It is quite common in fetish profiles to see a wish for a master to ‘come into’ or to ‘break’ a slave. And yet as I know well from my experience, awareness of what I might be doing by itself is by no means enough to enable change. How silly of me to be doing this! PHG does not speak at all here to the relational context within which this field event is happening, nor the relational support required for different choices to be available.

E. Ghent, although not a gestaltist, writes compellingly about the submission/dominance terrain. His argument is that “submission is a perversion of surrender” – and he suggests that a sexual or ‘lifestyle’ submissive confuses ‘what is symbolised’ – ‘surrender’ (which is unbearable), with the symbol – ‘submission’ and the trappings of SM. I quote at length from Ghent because his position matches quite closely to where I find myself in terms of understanding the relational dynamics of master/slave, though with less of the illuminative possibilities that come from living and owning this experience (my italics in the quote below):

“Submission, losing oneself in the power of the other, becoming enslaved in one way or other way to the master, is the ever available lookalike to surrender. It holds out the promise, seduces, excites, enslaves, and in the end, cheats the seeker-turned-victim out of his cherished goal, offering in its place only the security of bondage and an ever amplified sense of futility. By substituting the appearance and trappings of surrender for the authentic experience, an agonising, though at times temporarily exciting, masquerade of surrender occurs: a self-negating submissive experience in which the person is enthralled by the other. The intensity of the masochism is a living testimonial of the urgency with which some buried part of the personality is screaming to be exhumed. This is not to be minimised as an expression of the longing to be healed, although so often we bear witness to its recurring miscarriage.” (Ghent)

My personal stance is like Ghent to be sceptical of the long-term viability of relationships based around explicit and entrenched inequalities of power, although of course many people (I might venture all of us) live in relationships where inequality of power is a factor some of the time. Gianni Francesetti (2015. p. 152) defines intentionality for contact as “the way in which the organism senses and expresses [the call of the field]”. I suggest that in the long or short-term, with enough support, intentionality always pulls in a direction other than one of the true domination and ownership of one person by another (in most actual master/slave relationships the power balance is more subtly constructed and it is more complex than one person simply exercising control over another). And yet for all my intellectual resonance with these authors, none of what they say is likely to be of much help to someone who continues to be drawn towards master/slave.
Neither do these writings engage with the potential positive experiences that more recent (pro-kink) writers (e.g. In Langdridge and Barker Eds. 2007) attribute to BDSM – particularly in relation to explorations of gender, power, and embodiment. As with trans narratives, BDSM engages with the ways in which we inhabit and do not inhabit our bodies: when something about our embodied experience does not fit with gender expectations or cultural norms, or simply with our human heart-body-groinal potentiality, how much do we mark ourselves out as different, for example through a BDSM identity, OR how much do we search out support for a new creative adjustment that might involve grieving for and coming to terms with our current way of embodying, but also which allows the possibility of something different to emerge (a new ‘synthesis’ in PHG terms).

One way I look at master/slave interactions is as a way of making our peace with creative adjustments that have become too fixed, acknowledging that in some respects we will never fully inhabit our bodies, or that the passage towards doing so will mark us, and leave us changed – hence a lot of the rituals around body marking and modification within BDSM.

I also experience a certain spirituality latent in BDSM, whether one chooses to engage in BDSM practice or not. Indeed a part of what I experience as its spiritual potential is in precisely the way BDSM’s inherent contradictions speak against straightforward acting out. Having this strand within my sexuality has required me to do a lot of sitting with myself. When there may not have been enough support to transmute base metals into gold, when there was no alternative I have had to really listen for the deep callings within myself and from my field around whether to act from my sexual desire or not.

I hope I have conveyed the complexity that I experience in relation to BDSM, and the fact that for me it is far from a simple question as to whether it is right for me to explore (whatever ‘right’ might mean in this context). I find similar depths and ethical questions in relation to choosing to write about it. I do not have the answers, and yet in writing this article I am putting my money on the helpfulness ultimately of our being able to name and talk about BDSM. For me I have found that the call to act from this sexual impulse is sometimes a sign of the urgency of my need for more support. I have to own the BDSM within me if I am to allow the field to do its work of reconfiguring, and allow the vulnerable parts in me to be met in different and compassionate ways.

**MY EXPERIENCE**

The process of writing has provided me with an opportunity (I could say an excuse) to open myself to my yearnings. A first draft of this piece contained some judgment and harshness towards BDSM and therefore towards myself. I felt shame, and partly as a response I then ‘gave in’ and gave myself permission to log on to a master/slave website. This led to an encounter with a master in France.

*Within moments of ‘meeting’ Martin I was gripped. I logged out of the website and we transitioned to talking on Skype. There was none of the usual ambivalence – frankly boredom – that I have with a lot of masters. Martin was good looking, the right age, had presence and authority. His fetishes/kinks were very similar to*
He showed an interest in me – ordered me to spend seven hours one day writing a gestalt essay (talk about support Laura Perls!) – and very soon we had set up a routine whereby I would begin my day by saluting him in a particular way, we would connect throughout the day online, he gave me tasks and rituals to do that sparked my kinkiness and made me feel good and met in my difference. I opened up to him and developed hopes of eventually moving to France and serving him there. He was incidentally also very supportive of my finishing my gestalt training.

However from his point of view the ‘relationship’ happened differently. He almost terminated it on the second day because he discovered me logged back into the master/slaves website – it was to get some inspiration for writing this article, but my explanation cut little slack. A couple of days later I lost points for walking away from a conversation – my flatmate had just come out of the bathroom and I was dying for a pee. And the final straw was an instance where something he had asked me to do was beginning to cause me discomfort. He said he was busy that day so I removed the offending article without asking him. As reconciliation Martin asked me to do some deep soul searching and produce a piece of writing detailing all of my faults and failings as a slave. I shouldn’t acknowledge that I laughed to the point of hysterics with my friend when he asked me what I wrote: I told him “well I’m not very humble, am I? Arrogance, narcissism... lack of deference,”. But I owned a little deceit, and from Martin’s point of view this was not little. As a consequence he decided that I was not the slave for him and questioned whether I could ever make the jump to putting the needs of another first. He questioned my ‘value proposition’.

Martin held a mirror up to me – of the painful extent to which my way of avoiding pain is to focus on externals (how well am I doing at work, how do I look), and the real sparsity still of my inner world. He helped me to see, uncomfortably, how this applies also to my therapy training, and to my setting up this Journal (this is not all these things are to me but a significant part).

It is a cliché within the master/slave world but speaks to something nonetheless, that society does not make it easy to be a man with a desire to submit to another man. I have dealt with this by creating an identity and channelling energy towards what has been available for me – work, success, social change – precisely the external-facing edifice that Martin saw and challenged. [a reframe is to acknowledge that these things – the achievement and the submission – are happening together – one is not causal of the other: what I deny myself is space (for myself and for relationship) – the excluded middle. The fact I have had energy tied up in BDSM, exacerbated by the stigma and my inability to speak of it, may be precisely the cause of my continuing to inhabit these identities to the extent I do.]

Before he dumped me, Martin said that he would ‘put his body in various ways with mine that would hold a mirror up to who and to what I am’. I trusted him and I wanted it, because what he said chimed with how I sometimes experience myself on a deep level. He exercised absolutely no compassion towards me; there was nothing save for his own needs that was loaded on his telling me. There was no judgment, so I could hear him. This is also why I would have done almost anything for him, or so I believed.

I have since updated a part of the text on my master/slave profile to read:
“I have lived, and am living, a life of little meaning, without acceptance of myself and of my place. At my core I feel lost and alone and helpless and I want to ask Your forgiveness Sirs and Your help.”

It is very painful. And then he left.

My chest hurt, I was devastated, and I wasn’t able to work for a week. I snorted poppers and went online – and did the reflex thing where you try to find a replacement.

As I process what happened with Martin, I have in my mind an image of Maggie Gyllenhaal in the film Secretary (2002) grasping tenaciously onto a desk for days, to the point where she is not eating and is risking humiliation in front of bemused onlookers because her ‘master’ has said she must not remove her hands. I identify with Gyllenhaal’s ‘clinging on’, potentially sacrificing everything to this one thing because it speaks to something core to who I am and to my channel for connection to another. I won’t, or it perhaps fits equally well to say I can’t, convey this to a therapist (or most therapists) because I fear that the typical relational map of a therapist does not extend far enough towards supporting the expression of the degree of vulnerability that requires precisely the presence of a Master projected or real to contain. This might feel classic trauma terrain, and yet whose is the trauma? Master/slave can loom so large – we cling to it, against the world – because it holds something that if this thing is missed, then so are we. And I venture that Gyllenhaal’s urge, like mine, speaks to the desperate need for, if not the actual presence of, love.

I would argue that it is in the meeting between the BDSM terrain and the wider world that the healing takes place. The scene from Secretary is interesting and memorable because it allows for precisely such an integration between private (master/slave) space and public space. This is the cathartic moment – this offers the potential for healing if some of the life energy that is ‘split off’ and held within the SM domain can be re-grafted onto wider social relationships: but this always involves the death of something (the fantasy), and/or the acceptance of a previous painful loss. Alternatively, as I think is the case in the film, it creates the potential for more trauma – given the general lack of understanding of what is presented by master/slave within our culture – where the audience (and think here of many therapists) do not understand what they are witnessing.

When I have shared about master/slave in groups I meet with a lot of “I have no problem with you - I see more to you than this...”. But this still feels to me like a form of not engaging. Indeed an issue I have with some pro-kink writing is the extent to which BDSM is accepted at face value. This is an understandable response to previous psychopathologising of BDSM – but in so doing it continues to reify a you-I distinction: we are different – some of us have this within us, some of us do not. I do not see much grappling and getting down and dirty with the nature of what BDSM brings up for non-BDSM practitioners, or what happens thus to the ‘between’ of our connection.

Another way of naming what is often missing is the possibility that my figure “of master/slave, or BDSM” can emerge as part of a co-emergent figure that belongs to a group or situation. This does not require that everybody resonate in the same way (still
less in a ‘sympathetic’ way), but it does entail that of necessity everybody will have some ownership of what is happening.

The possibility of a different, healing narrative is shown in the film *Lars and the Real Girl* (2007), in which Ryan Gosling stars as a loner processing his grief over his mother’s death through having a relationship with an inflatable sex doll. The film shows the potential for a different and more sympathetic response from ‘society’ - the material here is not explicitly BDSM but I think the parallel holds up. *Lars and the Real Girl* speaks to my sense of the need for and possibility of finding a shared language (or a metaphor) for the experiences that are inherent in master/slave relating, and for the necessity that these experiences be met by others in order that the isolating and separating figure can be lived relationally again.

With a little apprehension I include a brief extract from a piece of creative writing I wrote ten years ago to convey a sense of my creative adjustment. I date these events to my brother being born and I can remember them happening. My parents must have missed me in some way: I am sure there was intergenerational trauma involved. To deal with my feelings that were not met, I found a way of shutting my parents off, at the cost of shutting myself down.

“I raised myself. My parents do not know this - or if they do - then not how or why... it is all the same. When I misbehaved as a child and dad carried me upstairs to bed, he thought he was carrying me upstairs to bed, his son. He was not. I was not the son he carried. And when we reached the top I stopped fighting not because he had won me; no amount of kicking and screaming could convince him he had not. I was tired. A soggy smile was what victory I could grapple - and then that heft of breath as between pitch and volley when dad moved to pull to the ruby-red curtains, and there might have fallen something, an indefinable thing, that would have made visible to him my windmills, or would have rendered them superfluous, but it never did. And I continued for unfathomable nights to watch his back dyed pink in the amber light of the street lamps - receding, and to swallow the air sucked out from the door. Just the tick I thought, though I dare say I didn't perceive it, of the child magician's urge to gather his tools back into his box, and say - terrified of having tamed attention - “that wasn't it”.

With pain I must have watched his back retreating, and with a sense of something gone. I was an outsider to my eyelids, was over my shoulder - in the paint on the walls, and in the curtains - these things threatened to give me up and hurl me back.

How could I tell my father this? That something had come between us, and between the being and doing of things. That in future (surely my intimation was not wrong), it would be ‘this thing’ that he would come to know (and that he was putting to bed) - and not me. Alas this was turning out to be the particular tragedy of my situation - the tragedy of being able to find tragedy in your situation.”

(Creative writing 2005)

I find this unbearably hard to be with now. I include it to give you, the reader, a sense of the nature of the contact boundary disturbance that sits as ground to my attraction towards master/slave.

Following this episode with Martin I returned to my gestalt training group. Initially I came...
under fire from a couple of fellow trainees for something I had said the previous weekend. I did not want to engage with this or with them (though as one person observed, the figure was to do with violence – it was related). Another colleague noticed that I looked like I was in a bad place. I shared the lineaments of what had happened. I knew she was here with me. Tears came. I felt my body crumpling, as if my middle could not hold, like I was wrenching and I would disappear into the place in the middle where my body bent – as if there were nothing there. My experience of being met in this place, and my tears, were a balm. My sense was of being supported and held on a very deep level and this opened me in a different way than I have previously experienced at my training institution. The experience of being more open lasted somewhat throughout the weekend.

I relate this experience to the many other healing experiences I have had particularly at Cleveland and Esalen when talking about the master/slave aspect of my sexuality – insofar as this stands for much else about my personal field and character structuring. I can only think that the master/slave figure has continued to emerge since and continues to emerge, because of my remaining need for support and for more relational integration.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Experiences of meetings like this continue to play an important part in my process. I do not start from a position of advocating for openness towards BDSM, though I have found that talking about it is a much needed aspect of my healing. And particularly at an earlier stage in my journey when I had less trust that the relational underpinnings of my sexuality would co-emerge otherwise, I needed to talk about it. Likewise my current process of sharing my journey, through writing about master/slave, has been a great invitation towards really seeing myself. This has helped me get clearer and bring into relational contact the embodied feelings and experiences that underlie their enactment in BDSM.

I am aware that I am writing as if the healing were only (or primarily) of benefit to those of us who have BDSM dynamics playing out within us, and implicitly that change is needed. A more relational perspective would of course suggest that the benefits go both ways, and that everything is just okay as it is. However I’d suggest that this kind of acceptance is a marker of having already got quite a long way with this journey. If I were able to accept everything just as it is, I would already be different.

I have attempted in this article to give voice to my experience of the slave part in me and what it might stand for. Simultaneously I have tried to provide a little perspective and give a sense of what might be some of the process, and relational needs of clients presenting with similar issues apparently around sex. We have to be more open to hearing these narratives within gestalt. I would suggest that the way to be with BDSM is to lay aside assumptions and to get curious about what we are witnessing. We must get over our hang-ups and try to make space for, and open ourselves to, the embodied and metaphorical vocabulary another has found to give voice to, and an insight into their world, and their pain.


Lars and The Real Girl (2007), Film, Directed by Craig Gillespie, USA


Secretary (2002), (Film), Directed by Steven Shainberg, USA

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Many thanks to Leanne O'Shea for her support through the process of writing this paper.
“My way” is the name of a song by the Russian poet and musician Svetlana Surganova in which the heroine reflects on her way through life - where she goes, whom she wants to be. I love this song and I like to think about my way - what direction I will travel, what I can rely on and what tasks I have got to do. Now, in this current phase of my life, I think about my way of becoming a Gestalt therapist. How I chose to become a therapist, how I am choosing now to continue to be one, despite the fact that this practice is rather complicated.

I would like to dedicate my article to this. This article is about decision, about choice, and from the point of view of Gestalt therapy, probably about ego functioning too. It is about my attempts to understand how this all works and what helps me to continue to choose this path, not to leave the race.

Therapy is not my first profession. I have a bachelor degree in economics, but I worked for many years and still work in the media, reporting news. I have enjoyed considerable success in my first profession.

I like my work, I enjoy doing it, but one day I felt that it was no longer enough for me. I was ashamed to talk about what I was doing and realised that I wasn’t able to tell myself who I was anymore. Sometimes it is very painful to realise that you cannot tell yourself and others who you are. It was impossible then to continue to enjoy my work and be proud of it.

In my life there were moments when I got great pleasure from what I did. I liked mathematics, I loved to solve problems, I opened a maths textbook and did exercises. It was a challenge for me. And beside maths I liked to help people.

If I could return to the past, to when I was a young girl, I would probably tell myself to become a doctor. I would tell myself that I
would succeed and that I just needed to try a little and not be afraid. But I remember my younger self and I remember that I was frightened. And I did not know a lot. And probably I didn’t listen to anyone. I wanted to go my own way.

And now, as a therapist, I look back at my situation and I think that I did not have enough support to form a clear figure and to make a choice.

It was the beginning of my life. I had a lot of energy, a lot of enthusiasm, a lot of interest, but I did not have enough focus or a clear understanding. I had very little life experience, very little understanding of what I was able to do and what I was interested in. I had very little self, but around me everything was interesting and tempting.

I wanted to try everything, I wanted to know everything, and it was so difficult to make decisions. There are no limitations at the beginning of the way, I did not have a sense that anything was impossible, I was open to all roads and believed that there was an eternity ahead.

And my journey became an adventure. I responded to my own interests, and I responded to those of others. I was called and I followed. I cannot say that this was not a conscious way at all, no, but it looked as if there really was no figure. Or it just started to form.

Our Gestalt therapy teacher says, “one session – one figure”. Sometimes when I think about myself, and why I am here, I feel like I am thinking about a figure that’s been forming all my life. Yes, the figure does not appear quickly. I tried something, searched, got experience, and at one moment the ground became full and outlines of the figure began to appear. The figure of what I would do with my life.

When I had taken the first step and I had decided to try to change my profession and become a Gestalt therapist, I was faced with how difficult this was. It was not easy to give up a familiar way of life; it was not easy to think about private practice – which meant saying goodbye to a stable salary within the state structure. And most importantly it was not easy to be a therapist, to learn techniques, to get the knowledge, experiences and personal qualities that are needed in therapeutic work. It was not easy to call myself a therapist. I always felt not ready and not grown up enough.

And when I realised that it was a difficult choice I immediately wanted to run away, not to move forward but to stay with what I had. However, to abandon my choice seemed in fact, more difficult than to do it. So I decided not to run away, and to deal with the difficulties that arose.

And in this article I want to talk about what helps me and what I have learned besides mastering the techniques of Gestalt therapy, because without this knowledge it is impossible for me to continue to grow – to master Gestalt techniques. Without the benefit of these knowledge I would have run away.

• First, a scientific interest in psychology.
• Second, holding space and “bracketing”. Learning to stay close and be able to take out your own feelings.
• Third is the framework of the therapy – the
setting.
• Fourth is the importance of self care.
• And fifth is passion for therapy.
I will look at these in turn.

ABOUT SCIENCE

When I first came to Gestalt therapy, it was very important for me to understand how psychotherapy works. I really lacked knowledge, I felt extremely insecure about what I was doing and why. And I quickly realised that the therapist's actions should be purposeful. Each word spoken by the therapist is an action, and it can influence the dynamic of the session, so everything in the session has meaning and nothing can be hidden from the client.

So for me it is really important to understand what I am doing. To what end are my words directed and for what purpose is the experiment being conducted? And although I support the idea of contact and of being spontaneous, I understand that I, as a therapist, also need to learn how to formulate my hypotheses, to mentally construct the experiment that I want to offer and to analyze the results. For me, this makes the Gestalt experience close to a scientific one and makes the work very interesting. Therefore, I try to devote time to learning more about the psychological sciences.

It seems to me that the scientific approach to Gestalt therapy is a very promising one, because it provides important support, makes the work more conscious and offers new views for the development of therapeutic practice.

HOLDING SPACE

The second important aspect for me is what I think of as ‘holding space’ and ‘bracketing’. I like to give space to the client: to his thoughts, his feelings, his being in the session. To be a little off-camera.

But this curiosity and interest in the Other and my calmness around not being so much in the session: to at once be, but at the same moment to acknowledge that everything I do and say is part of my job, and even my spontaneity is part of the therapy – none of this came immediately.

In Gestalt therapy, this is formulated as the principle of ‘bracketing’. ‘Bracketing’ helps me to observe my feelings and thoughts, and then put them aside and listen to the other. I understand that when I'm a therapist, my role is to help the client find his own ground.

This fear arose after a series of losses. I have grieved a lot in recent years for the loss of myself as a daughter, granddaughter, a person belonging to a big family. I wanted to continue to be important and necessary, to be significant for the family, but my family in the form I was used to, as a big and very supportive system had died.

And it took a long time to stop feeling my own uselessness, despair, then loneliness, before I was able to start seeking meaning again. In my client work, I began to be cautious that my desire to be important and necessary, to prove that I am useful and that I can do something, does not push my client.
Abandoning the idea of my importance and being needed has become an important support in my work with clients, because it gives more space to the client. This is, in essence, what John Enright writes about when he says that Knowledge is already there.

Clients come to therapy in order to find their independence, to create their own system of support, to face their loneliness, find their own meaning, and gain knowledge. My task was to learn to feel sadness about myself and to be curious about what the client is doing by himself. Svetlana Surganova, whose song I took for the title of my article, wrote another song. The words of which very well represent the feeling of rejection, when others have no need for you. Nevertheless it is important to accept and remain in relationship: “Time to say: don’t hold, let go! Heart in a fist, but unclench a hand.” My task as a therapist is to stay close and be open to what the client can do by himself, and not to squeeze my heart in a fist, feeling frustration and sorrow, but remaining open and accessible, not to reject the client’s “I can do it myself”, not to leave him, to give him the opportunity to choose to do it or ask for help.

After the sadness about my own lack of attention changed into curiosity and interest in the Other and in what we were creating together, I realised that for there to be contact and growth, it is important to be able to create something new, to make something together.

**SETTING**

The third important support for me, and my most serious challenge was the fact that I needed to be disciplined and needed to respect the therapeutic setting. Because the setting is not only the framework for the client, but also the framework for the therapist. Why is it so important to me? Well, before I began my training I was not very good at controlling my body. I had moments when I struggled with an eating disorder, I had a chaotic lifestyle, slept little and worked a lot. I soon realized that while working with the client I needed to be in a good emotional and physical place, I started to examine my own discipline and explore the importance of what I call ‘Setting’ for me and for my clients. In Gestalt therapy this is not much talked about, but I talked to psychoanalysts a lot, and among them the setting is a frequent topic.

The words of Bion impressed me a lot. “It doesn’t matter how ill you are, how tired, how mentally or physically sick, you have to preserve your discipline.”

The setting is the framework which helps the client to gain control over his or her own chaos, chaos of the mind, of relationships. Sometimes I have to refuse offers to see clients in their offices, even where this would save me money (in room rental), because the setting is so important. I have trained myself that if I have a session in the morning, I need to be ready for it. I finish my other work early and have a rest. Otherwise I can’t be ready. Neville Symington in his book “Becoming a person through psychoanalysis” talks about his experience of maintaining self-discipline and adhering to certain rules. During one year he spent 20 minutes every day writing down his thoughts about a topic that stimulated him, about narcissism. And he noticed how hard it was to obey his rule, but what deep satisfaction he found in these 20-minutes of meditation and how
interesting were his thoughts during those 20 minutes, how his knowledge of narcissism and psychoanalysis changed. This experience for me is a sign that not only obedience to the rules is important in the setting, but also the possibility to reflect once or twice a week on our life through our own therapy is quite useful. I try to rely on it.

Italian philosopher Franco “Bifo” Berardi said: “Our modern life is such that its rhythm does not resonate with the human being’s. It is impossible to process information at such a speed”. And according to Berardi, we respond to this rapidity with panic and depression.

Once again to pause, breathe, stop and think about who I am and what I do, seems very important. And this is what helps me to move further. I give myself time take a break and think. This time out allows me to become aware of my emotions and feel the phases of the contact cycle, distinguish them and better understand what is happening to me.

**CARE OF MYSELF**

A final and related challenge and support in my work has been learning to take care of myself. Not all training programs teach how important it is for the therapist to think about their own comfort. But during a child counselling programme, we devoted a lot of time to this. I took part in an experiment in which the task of the therapist was to put their own comfort ahead of being there for the client. Often our clients have no experience of trusting an adult. I cared a lot about my parents and worried about them, even as a small child. Before my personal therapy I didn't have any experience of adults being able to take care of themselves and hold their feelings. Neither did I have experience of being able to tell adults about my pain or my needs without fear of destroying them. Therefore based on my experience I want to be this adult for my clients. Of course in order to do this I have to create my own support system. Personal therapy, supervision, communication with colleagues, good and full acceptance of my own relationships with loved ones – all these are resources, which allow me to be stable and fully present in my work. I try not to forget that clients are very sensitive to any discomfort they may feel the therapist is in. And practicing self care in very simple things, it becomes easier and easier to work with clients because I feel comfortable, relaxed and self-confident.

Once I saw a phrase on a social network, and I think it’s as simple as this: “You cannot give to another what you do not have.” If I do not take care of myself, I cannot take care of another. I'm comfortable with working with a client when I'm properly resourced. If I am distracted and feel uncomfortable, it is very difficult for me to be aware of the work. So I try to leave all the problems of the day beyond the doors of the therapy room.

**PASSION**

The fifth point it is passion. Maybe the main one, but it is so hard to acknowledge, that I added it only after the article had been completed. But the passion and pleasure that is born when I work with clients, when I talk about therapy with colleagues, is so powerful, that it can be inexpressible, but cannot be hidden. And it is a great motivation and provides support to move forward.

I would like to reflect now on where I’m going. I have enough time to think, I have
enough to lean on and I have the capacity to choose. I like that I practice Gestalt and I like to tell people that I do. I enjoy witnessing what happens to clients, when they find something or think about their ways, about themselves, when they overcome doubts and without pain can say what they were previously silent about before. And knowing from my own experience how difficult this is, I am happy to wait patiently. The previously mentioned concepts are a great help to me. And I am able to follow the advice of the psychotherapist Irvin Yalom, “to grow at your own pace, seriously and calmly.”

**REFERENCES**


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**Maria Grigorieva** is a trainee gestalt psychotherapist from Moscow, where she has a small but growing practice working with adults, and with plans to work with children and couples (LGBT-friendly). Maria has a bachelor’s degree in psychology and studied Gestalt therapy for 5 years at The Integrative Gestalt Training Institute, Saint Petersburg. She has also studied the Violet Oaklander method of Gestalt therapy for children. Maria is a news editor for the information agency *Russia Today*. maria.grigorieva.msk@gmail.com.
I would like to write about the influence of war. When the outside world is crashing, the inside world is crashing too. Things that seemed solid turn out to be a delusion. Things that were considered valuable lose their value. And the line between reality and fantasy fades. It feels like there is nothing to rely on. It is the time of inner apocalypse. When you’ve got everything and nothing at the same time. And the new world is born. It bears with it memories of the old world. These memories cast a cloud over a person’s life in the here-and-now. At first these clouds are numerous, but step by step they thin out. I’d like to describe these dramatic feelings, my personal experience of war, and of working with survivors of war - when the environment goes through these dramatic changes, and my experience of the people whose lives it changes. I’d like to share my experience of gestalt-therapeutic work with the migrants of war.

**MY EXPERIENCE**

Several years ago I was a person experiencing myself quite differently from today. I could not identify my feelings as they arose and neither could I identify my own needs. As a therapist I gave individual therapy sessions and I worked with groups. Working with clients I could sense where in my body my feelings concentrated. I could roughly get an idea what these feelings were about. I spent a lot of time studying the body and working with sensations. I perceived the outer world and myself through body sensations: pain, numbing, difficulty breathing, rapid heartbeat. Being in contact with others I could sense the slightest changes in tone, micro emotions and the most subtle shades of facial expression. This skill ‘to see’ the world I developed when I was a child, because I spent a lot of time painting. Back then I could only identify and express my feelings when they grew large. All dawning or low-intensity feelings eluded me. I admired people who were able to cry just because
they were touched by someone's story or memories.

I remember clearly when during a face-to-face supervision session, while I was working with a client, my supervisor put a man behind me. He had to touch my shoulder every 3 minutes, reminding me that I also feel something in the here-and-now.

It may seem weird that as a therapist I could work having such a limited form of a contact with myself and others. I am astonished at how hard I worked. It was unsafe for me because I could bodily sense the symptoms of a client a while after the session.

Everything changed with the beginning of the war in Ukraine or rather before it, with massive protests. I was right there in the place where it started – our ground zero. Fighting enormous fear I was on duty with the medical patrol in Maidan Square (the site of the revolution of 2013-14), with snipers shooting the protesters from the rooftops.

I did not stop my practice when the war with Russia broke out. I remember talking to my clients about the necessity of having a car ready with a full tank of fuel, to pack your papers and essentials in one bag and ready to expedite your leave with your children in case Kiev got bombed. We were trying to figure out how long it would take the Russian army to get to Kiev and how we would defend our homes.

My world crashed finally when the Boeing-777 was shot down near Torez (Donetsk area). 298 people died, 80 children among them. 2 days passed. It was Saturday. I felt overwhelming grief and weakness for my inability to change anything. I was crying, but I had so many feelings that all were unbearable. They flooded me. Not only the Boeing passengers died that day, the world I believed in died too. It felt as if my inner home had been blatantly invaded and then destroyed. I got a comprehension that it would never be the same again. I found myself ‘versing’ my feelings. I was writing verses for the whole day, even though in the end what I was left with came down to just 8 lines, each one gave relief. My feelings got shaped in words and remained on paper:

July 19, 2014
The soldier fires his missile.
It hits. His hand remains still.
And down rain like comets, like crystals,
On Ukrainian soil, bodies killed.

Ripened grain welcomes them from on high
The bodies of innocent mothers and daughters.
And their souls will forever remain in the sky
Like a flock of cranes circling calm waters.

19 июля 2014
Наемник запустил ракету.
Попал. Не дрогнула рука.
И вниз теперь летят кометами
К земле украинской тела.

Летят на зрелые хлеба
Тела невинные детей.
Их души остаются в небе
Как стая журавлей.

My experience of these extreme emotions brought back my ability to feel myself. It felt like thawing, reviving. I began to perceive my inner world anew, in a way that I had never experienced it. Full-scale sensitivity to my inner world of feelings joined my sensitive perception of the outer world. This time I ran
to the other extreme. I began feeling way too much; therefore I often fell into suffering. Poetry became my way out. As I write this now tears well up with the thrill from these first memories. It is hard to believe that 3 years ago I could only dream that I had such a facility to express my feelings.

Now I am able to recognize the subtle changes of my feelings at the contact-boundary and notice changes in others. In case I have certain feelings that I cannot bring to full awareness in the here-and-now, I turn to poetry. As an example, I once was a bystander at a therapy session. The client was talking about her fears that prevented her making contact with other people. She said: ‘It feels as if I grieve about something un-lived.’ This phrase triggered some feelings and I started to write. Here’s what I came up with:

I grieve for what I have not lived,  
Not quite understood, a faint recollection.  
Like the life which I’ve lived is not mine,  
But of someone who shares my reflection.

I did not live, but from a distance I looked on,  
Where on the stage, so expertly, carefree  
I played myself, the leading role  
On this cruel planet where it pains me to be me.

But sooner or later, all this will end,  
The stage lights and the burning stars will fade.  
My grief, it too shall disappear.  
And I’ll awake in worlds anew, reborn and unafraid.

Talking with my patients who made it through the loss of their children, I learned that experiencing grief made them more alive, and changed their life values from material ones to spiritual ones. Life itself became a value. Stereotypes were wearing off. As if the people were coming out of a trance. In my experience awareness of having a terminal disease works similarly. People who brave severe drug abuse feel like they have grown to a new level of life with totally different sensitivity towards themselves and the world around them. They say such experiences were the most terrifying they ever had. Though these very experiences gave them courage to be.

**MIGRANTS**

The war with Russia started 3 years ago, the last 2 years of which I spent working as a gestalt therapist with migrants from the occupied territories of the Eastern Ukraine and Crimea through individual sessions. I had 6-8 sessions a week with every client. I worked with around 50 people who now live in Kiev and its surrounding area. This is a tiny proportion of the total number of migrants (1.7 m). After we ended our work some people stayed in touch. I noticed that those migrants whom I talked to were significantly different from people who had never experienced a total crash of their
I noticed that after having lost literally everything: their houses, friends, jobs, future prospects, expectations of state support, the hope of going back home in a few months, these people developed better resilience and tenacity in everyday issues. The value of life came to the forefront.

Now they are dreaming about lots of things. They are busy making their dreams come true and with relatively scarce funds they live way more of a vibrant spiritual and social life than others.

Here is what some of my patients have said about facing the reality of war:

“I felt as if I'd gone insane when Crimea became part of Russia. It was impossible to accept and believe it. As if I'm being shown a black color and being persuaded it is white. As if some part of me was killed or abducted. It's like I exist, but without an important limb.”

“I don't consider it as a war, more like a bloody reality show. It's absurd. If I see that somebody dies at war or from alcohol abuse, it's just a reminder that life is finite. My sense of time is more vivid. It's like a timer or an hourglass. The only resource is time. It can be sold for nothing or at a very high price. But one way or another it's going out.”

“I figured one thing: a man can always leave everything and start over again. I'm getting there. There will always be something else for you. You can take any turn you want.”

“Two weeks after the escape, you realize there's no one to rescue you. Nobody needs you. Hence you have no chance to fail. There's none. So you have to pick yourself up and head to nowhere.”

“Fears are left behind in favor of mere survival. Nothing is positive. The negative is wiped out, too. Life's reset to zero point. It's start from scratch, which is some sort of freedom, too. Freedom from everything.”

“It looks more like chaos, panic. There's no place to return to. There's no way back. There's no support in the outer world and I was trying to find it inside of me. It's something you have to do by yourself. You're all alone. You're not needed, neither by the country nor by your friends. Nobody will help you out. Emotional resignation. Accepting the reality. So I started to build life again completely on my own.”

Ukrainians, as people from other post-soviet countries, are predisposed to confluence. In order to feel safe people had to fit the pattern created by the socialist regime. Shame and guilt were the most common tools which were used to shape a personality. Comfort zones give some sense of certainty, but prevent you from gaining new experiences. They are like a peg that you hold tight to, somebody, something certain rules. Most people lived as if they were daydreaming or were 'somewhere around their life'.

War is like a 'kick' to start living your life, to be aware. Migrants and society in general reduced their level of confluence mainly owing to war. In an unpredictable and ever-changing environment, chaos made people pay more attention to their needs and boundaries. Crisis in a way revitalized society, too. With the beginning of war the background crashed on many levels:
financial, physical, emotional, social and spiritual. Values changed. War generated many volunteer organizations. War even brought back to life humanity forfeited to the techno-material world where power, status, wealth had been paramount – as if the Maidan revolution and war had awakened certain awarenesses in Ukrainian people, and human relationships gained value. Introjects about the world being safe and stable, the idea of the known and certain went to pieces. Old rules and patterns of behavior became void and ineffective. Life became the ultimate value. It entailed change in people's quality of life. People started valuing the quality of the process rather than the outcome, especially regarding long-term decisions.


“You know, when I moved to Kiev, I lost everything: my house, business, friends and something else. Something inside me snapped and disappeared forever. It's neither really bad nor good. I've just started to live a different life. I took my forced leave as a sign. It's time to do things I was always dreaming about. I enrolled in a filmmaking school. I started to make movies professionally. In my stories I render my feelings and my philosophy through my heroes. Recently my film was shown at the international film festival. I'm learning a lot and I'm open to new experiences. It seems to me that I'm happy. I learn to treat the world differently. I grew to be more tolerant of human nature and its imperfections. I'm religious. Before I was intolerant of those who didn't follow canons. Now it's different.”


“My comfort zone disappeared: my flat, country house, job, friends who could help you out, mom stayed there and all my relatives. My attitude to things has changed. I have no wish to have any tangibles or something permanent. I do not pile things. It's not interesting for me anymore. I live for the day. It just comes out this way. Only the nearest plans. I'll save some money and go to the mountains with my girlfriend until I run out of funds. Now it takes less time between thinking and doing. I became more energetic. I have to get a move on. My perception of time is sharper. A timer or rather an hour-glass counts down the time before your rent is due. I'm fighting shyness and take part in the movie castings, though it's a torture for me. I overcome my shame and then receive something in return. New experiences. Emotions. Art takes all the time I have. I listen to tons of music. I read a lot. I write some articles and essays. After all these events I started to draw a bit, to write poems and to compose some weird music. I play 9 instruments not knowing how to play them properly. I never learned. I'm trying to live not comparing myself to anybody, measuring what I do. I'm just trying to make do with the bit I have, overcoming my fear of life.”

Asine (32), a migrant from Crimea. Worked as a psychologist in a private center. Presently living in Lvov with the family since 2014. Married. Recently had a second baby.

“After leaving Crimea I allowed myself to do what I never did there following the rules of an orthodox Muslim family. I started taking
care of myself, putting my needs first. I wasn't inviting people I didn't want to see to my place. I cut talking to those who didn't appeal to me. I started living the way I wanted. The whole year I was resting, walking around my new city. I was taking care of my husband and my kid, because I've had this wish for a long time. I started doing some art, because I've been dreaming about it since I was a child."

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The crash of the background always poses a threat. A threat to relationships, psychological and physical health, wealth, professional competency, ability to survive and find secure ground. There are different ways of coping with the impact of such a crash:

• to go insane;
• to get stuck in a transitional point and wait till you drift ashore somewhere;
• to shift the emphasis to self-destruction, having lapsed into illness;
• to turn into the victim of your circumstances and suffer;
• to muster all your strength and create a new world step by step.

I realize that my clients are the people who decided to start their own life relying on their experience and inner voices, the voice of their needs. Here's what one of my clients said: “I am bringing to mind all things, you know, skills, connections, certain agreements. This feeling is similar to one I had when I was 20, right after my graduation. That's me, there are dozens of roads to take. It's scary, but it rocks.”

My therapeutic work implied helping to find wholeness and new ways to adjust creatively to the changed world:

• To be close. To be steady. To be accepting. To support human ‘I-you’ relationships. ‘I’m with you’, ‘You have time’, ‘You did all you could in that moment’, etc. – such phrases help a client to remain steady even when he's overwhelmed with his feelings.

• To help a client meet himself, his own identity. All those changes, inflicted by the war, impaired common social frames and loosened introjects that formed life before. Prior defense mechanisms stopped working. This led to better understanding of their own personality and needs, shaping their standpoints as a response to change in the environment. In this time with the ‘safety shell’ broken you can feel the reality and your identity most profoundly. You could reorganize your personality. With your eyes open. As if to be reborn.

• To help clients assimilate experiences and look into the future. To support and follow-up on their first steps on their way to building a new world. Assist in their growth and changes – turning the impossible into the possible, the odd into familiar.

The psychotherapy of migrants is not a rehabilitation. It's transformation, the rite of transition from the old world to the new, which is being created in the here-and-now.
Olena Zozulya is a trainee gestalt psychotherapist, studying and practising in Kiev, Ukraine. She specialises in work with addictions, migrants from war, and people with borderline personality disorder. She likes writing poetry and composing fairy tales. She draws her own illustrations and also paints portraits. zozulyaom@gmail.com
Starting from birth our senses help us to find and choose from the outer world whatever is good for us. We are careful in this process to take what we need from our surroundings, chew it, make it a part of ourselves, and cast aside the non-useful leftovers. We do this with our experiences and we do it with food.

When the organism is healthy, this process is regulated independently and unconsciously. Just as with animals, so do humans have a sense of what is an adequate diet, which is genetically programmed. (S. Ginger, The art of the Contact, 1995.)

But sometimes, for the lack of emotional satisfaction, so called leaps happen. We call it creative adaptation, when food (and our relationship to it) compensates for our relationship to our environment, and also for our relationship with ourselves. And then our relationship with food becomes a manifestation of the way we behave in our relationships.

The easiest way to explain what is happening is through the Contact Cycle or Cycle of Experience, the way in Gestalt psychotherapy that we conceptualise the process of the individual making contact with their environment.

Each contact cycle begins with sensation, the feeling of the need. In relation to food, it could be the sensation in our stomach. If the cycle goes unobstructed, the awareness of that need arises. In this case the awareness of hunger. After we become aware we mobilise our energy in order to satisfy the need, so we might reach, make an action and take the food. After we reach, contact begins with the source of our need, we satisfy the need, and then having satisfied the need we withdraw and enter the fertile void. If we can bear to be here for long enough a new need arises.

If the functioning of the organism is healthy, there are no changes in the contact cycle. Each cycle moves forward in a relatively uninterrupted way towards completion. So the cycles repetitively compose and decompose, depending on which need appears and when. In the same way as we
take in food, we have the need to reach for a hug, a nice word and safety. But, there are moments when a certain need cannot be satisfied in the way desired.

For example, supposing in the moment of reaching out for a source of food, that we burn ourselves on the cooking stove. If this happens multiple times, we don't reach anymore, but the hunger remains. So in order to survive, we find another way of overcoming the hunger. Calling our parents for help, crying, or finding a different source of food... This way, the cycle transforms, it adjusts creatively through the process of interruption and change, with the aim of satisfying the need through other ways that are available in that moment.

In a similar way we can substitute the need for a hug and comfort with comfort from food. But, repeating a route that has helped us in the past to 'survive', when done repeatedly can become the source of dissatisfaction and frustration.

Replacing the hug or the kiss with a bite, avoiding the contact so we can avoid the injury, giving up on ourselves so we can be accepted – these are some of the forms of the numerous social adjustments which we, as individuals, agree to in life. We can see many of these play out in our relationships with food. What ultimately is not a bad choice when we are emotionally unsupported can become problematic when excessive (or insufficient) consumption of food causes additional emotional and social distance. We are obliged then to take a closer look and see what is happening. As observers we are obligated to help too.

**WHY WE EAT, AND WHY WE DON'T**

Our relationship with food can be looked upon as a manifestation of our relationship with the environment in which we live; our family, partner, friends, work. Moreover, using food as emotional language, through our relationship with food we are often telling our environment what we want and what we need.

By refusing food, we are sending signals that we do not want to be in relationship and in the experiences we are having in that moment. This happens when our boundaries are so compromised that we close all the gates toward our inner self and further injuries. By refusing food (aggressively) we are saying ‘no’ to everything that is coming from the outside. By refusing food we remain closed in our world that for us is the only ‘safe place’ from the threatening environment.

By taking excessive food, we are showing the need for relationship and the (healing) contact, which is not present at that moment in our environment. We are showing that we still have the capacity to take in experiences that, maybe, are not so nourishing; by choosing to stay in the place in which we do not get what we really need (but still hope for it), we show our yearning, our longing for relationship.

Eating disorders are a significant figure that directs us to what is happening in the background. By looking at it in this way, awareness and the authentic therapeutic contact can represent encouraging experience for people dealing with eating disorders. Providing the experience of emotional belonging is a healing process for
every individual in every life area, and so it is in relationship to food. By being in contact, we are giving our clients the opportunity to feel accepted, and the space in which they can find different ways to satisfy their needs for ‘emotional nutrition’. We are giving them a sense of that so wanted equilibrium that belongs to us all from the beginning, as our birthright.

**HOW OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH FOOD REFLECTS OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH OUR ENVIRONMENT**

There are many ways in which our relationship with food reflects our relationship with our environment. For example, a decision to go on a restrictive diet often hides non-acceptance of our body and how it looks, and in some cases it can reflect hate or criticism toward us from our external environment – when our bodies are not accepted by others. But in a large number of cases we are expressing anger and resentment toward a environment that has in some way cast us aside. The feelings we are directing toward ourselves, or retroflecting, stand for the need to be ‘accepted by rejecting ourselves’.

It happens often too, that after a restrictive diet, we regain all the weight previously lost with great effort. Because, when we finally achieve the look we want, we get positive reactions from our surroundings. With this, the need for contact, the need for life, returns. And food is life, the manifestation of contact. Then we please ourselves, we ‘see ourselves’, give ourselves that pleasure. And when we do this, we often do it excessively. We have been so isolated from relationship, from contact and love, that we need so much of it.

These are just some of the ways that we “tell’ our environment what we need from it. We are also conveying a message about what we need through the implied operation of our boundaries; are they lose, rigid or flexible? We can find out all this from the way we eat. Do we consume food by chewing, swallowing, consciously or not? Observing eating habits can convey the key life issues of our clients toward which we can then direct our therapeutic work.

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When I set out to write a piece for New Gestalt Voices, I felt nervous and excited about the opportunity to thread together and share something of what I have learned as a branding consultant. What has been most figural for me is whether, as a brand specialist and as a student and practitioner of Gestalt and Systemic Constellations, I have enough credibility to write. I realise this is completely at odds with the spirit of this journal, and I draw attention to it as my lived experience and paralleling an important theme in my work with clients – people feeling (good) enough.

At the beginning, I wanted to create an opinion piece, peppered with lively examples and solid facts. As the deadline has come and gone, now several times over, I realise that I am simply not ready nor willing to offer “this is how it is” writing. Given how emergent the work is, I may never be ready, just like some of my clients who are not ready to formalise their conceptual and visual brand identities as early as they first imagine. I will do what I recommend... I will reflect and share a collection of key observations from my journey of experiences over 20 years. I note here what an unusual experience it is to be invited to share so much of my internal process. I teeter on the edge of thrill and shame... a feeling of being seen and heard and all that brings.

BRANDING AS A TRANSFORMATIONAL EXPERIENCE RATHER THAN A RELABELLING

There are some differing perspectives on what a brand is. I understand a brand to be a constructed set of components that collectively represent who or what that person, organisation, product or service is. These elements include and are not limited to: purpose, promise, attributes, qualities, values, behaviours, name, logo, tone of voice, imagery and colour. The intention is to create something unique, memorable and relevant, and gain awareness, recognition and loyalty from internal and external audiences.

Brands identities are not only for business. Individuals and groups use branded identities as a means of differentiation in many walks
of life - e.g. religion, art and fashion.

I would suggest that identity exists in spite of our attempts to 'capture' it as a brand. Identity relates to purpose. This is where I see the opportunity to approach branding differently for greater gains.

My first and overriding observation is this: the branding process can offer a truly transformational experience for the client if agreed clearly upfront and held by a professional with the appropriate skills and training to approach the project in this way.

Secondly: there is a very definite tension to be held and flexed between the boundaries of contact with clients in order to make the branding process a transformational one, hence the need for the right skills. Usually I tell my clients to be prepared for all manner of disturbances in the field as all sorts can be triggered.

Lastly: Orienting clients to purpose can be a sticky business. Those clients who can sit with the unknown and in the fertile void really get something special for and of themselves. It’s not about the speed that something arrives from me, or not only… it’s that what arrives has the chance to form and grow a bit in their hearts before being launched and shared with the world. Everyone’s needs in this instance are different.

In my early career, brand discovery was a major event all about going ‘out there’ and returning with data and insights to surprise and inform the client. As the projects developed and creative ideas were conceived and delivered, contact began to wane. I felt deeply that we were continually missing key information held by the clients. There was a real desire to shock/surprise clients with uncovered customer data. And whilst I admit to having enjoyed the feeling of reveal and subsequent suggestions for what to do with the brand, I noticed over time a subtle yet important shift that left the client feeling somewhat dependent on the external teams that would provide this. Not a collaborative space – no thinking it through together… just “we take away your perceived issue and fix it.”

And as my personal life took a path towards gestalt psychotherapy, curiously given the many high-dependent and confluent relationships outside of my work, I started to see more clearly what lay within my professional ones. My mind began to shut down and I could no longer think clearly. I negotiated with my new employer for half a day once a week so that I could receive this support. What they didn’t know was that things had become so dire for me I was already going one night a week to therapy. I began a process of deep reflection.

Strengthened by this support, I began to see my life in the way I saw my clients – a fascinating biography filled with connected experiences, forming a clear thread. Lovers of brand work are often lovers of great stories, with love, loss, loyalty and struggle. Also, great pattern-spotters, as we look for repeats and glitches, heroes and haunts. I began to take heart as I sat with what is.

At no point did my therapist ring round my colleagues, family and friends to learn about my impact on the world. Nor did she hold focus groups where they all might congregate to discuss how things had been and how I might improve. She went straight to the source and taught me to trust what
was there. I was inspired by this process and could easily see how it would support my work.

And I think about the moment I reached out for support – things were tough. I think now about my clients and their courageous acts of reaching out for support, generally when things are more difficult. I am talking about a moment of both fragility and great strength. “I/we need external help to face this challenge.” When I arrived at this perspective, I was flooded with compassion rather than a compelling need to impress. Also, I had a deep curiosity to explore ‘what is’ as much as ‘what has been’ and ‘what might be’.

HONOURING MY ROOTS

I see great value in feedback processes – my opinions here are not in doubt of these nor any of the great threads of traditional branding. I am grateful for my roots. Simply, I am proposing there may be more perspectives and stages in the full process, and I see an opportunity to reframe the branding process as a learning and development experience for those clients interested in bringing their identity to the foreground.

BLENDING

Discovering systemic constellations whilst studying Gestalt gave me something incredible. I felt as though I had found language to describe something I had always sensed at a deep level. Every brand, team, organisation, etc, lives in its own force fields or systems, all beautifully connected with one another, beyond time and space, loyal to the past and compelled by the future. Gestalt gives me an enormous amount in terms of language, framework and an approach to situations. Through constellations training, I have learned to see the much wider context and how to make systemic interventions to address situations right at the heart of the matter. I have learned that some situations are only accessible via systemic approaches and that those in ‘helper systems’ can often be entangled and not helping at all.

GOOD ENOUGH BRANDING

Another aspect that has changed for me is the desire to create perfect brands. I believe that branding is most supportive to the organisation when it is a ‘good enough’ representation in order to support contact with customers. Conditions are never perfect and the process can sometimes be intent on finding perfection, capturing everything there is to capture, sharing the deepest wisdom or most authentic version. To me, this adds so much pressure.

I believe a strong brand is rooted in its past, reaching for its future and integrating all of its experience and capturing only what is necessary in the visual and written identity. Much of the process, as I see it, is about supporting clients on a developmental path to settle and land brand history and experience, in order that it becomes a resource for the creative process and for their work in general.

TrUTh sEtS YoU fReE

In my very first London agency role, I worked with a client – a huge property firm with great power and wealth. We developed their first website, which at the time was innovative, creative and verging on frivolous, at their request. On the day of the launch (1.5 years
in the building) we discovered a shocking truth. The clients had been working with another agency from part way through, building a back-up version in case things went wrong. All the key lessons were used to enhance this second version. The client chose to launch with the other site and our work went into the virtual bin. It was devastating to all of us. We had worked so hard and well beyond budget expectations to deliver something award-worthy. We hadn’t understood the relationship.

When I met the same client 10 years later, only to rebuild a new site, exactly the same thing happened again. With the support of my therapist, I took the opportunity to work with my shock. Even here I am reticent to use “trauma” though it’s really the only word to accurately describe the experience. I can get in touch with it as I write now – the shame was gripping.

This felt beyond coincidence. The agency and client had become polarised and the sense of gossip was rife. My therapist assisted me to take a Gestalt lens to the situation and explore the wider context. I was fascinated to learn about organisational dynamics and their roots in family systems. This knowledge meant I could truly learn from the situation and I began to realise that when we are working so intently with the purpose of an organisation, so too are we working with all their deepest history. We look often to the strengths and we must look also at the traumas. Herein lie the clues for how the relationship might evolve.

WHAT’S IN A NAME? OWNING OUR EXPERIENCES

Sometimes the current name is the very best one. One client asked me to specifically develop a new name for their global organisation. The more I explored their motivation for this with them, I discovered they had some deep trauma in the past that they had assumed could be ‘moved past’ if they changed the name. It turned out this was not an association their stakeholders made with them but one that was very painful for them. I recommended they kept their name and changed just the look. Had I more experience in organisational development at the time, I would have suggested coaching support here before continuing any work.

KNOWING WHOSE WORK BELONGS TO WHOM

A past client of mine was a fantastic doctor who had an enormous workload. His private practice was neither turning the profit he had expected nor breaking even. He knew, deep down, a big shift was required in how the business operated, and at the same time, would not break free from his daily tasks. As I stood beside him one day helping him to throw away clutter, I realised I was no longer helping and had become part of the problem. I was being paid brand rates and providing administrative services. This client needed a firm “no” from me and it took me a week to realise my collusion.

CREATIVE BREAKTHROUGHS

I worked with a client so deeply caring that often this person would put my needs well beyond her own. This great gesture of care coupled with my tendency towards confluence in certain dynamics resulted in little movement forwards. And as we noticed this together through our frustration, we
began to flex our contact styles until we were both able to create enough tension and struggle that we experienced a creative breakthrough in our thinking.

**THE ‘RIGHT’ TIME**

Sometimes it’s just not the right time. During the process of developing a brand for an organisation, I noticed how hard it was to get agreement across the internal stakeholder groups. Whatever I put forward, there was a strong response of yes and no - rarely anything in between. I was troubled for some time about how to create a new strapline. And then it hit me... this organisation’s purpose was to support difference in society... to really allow individuals to celebrate their difference. What was playing out in the branding process was exactly this. I was attempting to reach unity in an organisation dedicated to difference. So I suggested that a break might be in order to allow the organisation to tolerate a new level of unity.

**BACKING A WINNING HORSE – KNOWING MY PLACE**

I also have the privilege of working with several clients who offer services in a similar arena to me and with much more senior clients. This is possibly the trickiest for me as it triggers a wealth of worry around being good enough to work with them. I focus in on what I can provide and what my place is – a holding container, an emergent way of working and an ability to see them now, where they have come from and all they might be.

**INTRODUCTION**

The client can be so riddled with introjection they are unable to make progress with their brand identity without facing into this - e.g. I should already have a brand, I work in this field and have done this for others so I should know. I ought to have, etc. What’s most interesting to delve into is the rationale behind the original brief and to discover what hidden agendas might exist. I have noticed how loaded this whole process can be – everything from what we think we know to our greatest blindspots – it can all come up. This is why it makes great sense to me to approach brand identity processes as respectfully as you would treat identity in a therapy space.

**CONCLUSION**

Back in organisational roles, I often felt sad about the polarity between HR and commerce: two vital parts of the business unable to have healthy dialogue. I wanted connection here for the benefit of everyone. Now I see I have found my own way to bring these parts together. I feel compelled to continue my journey to further develop an approach to using the brand identity process as a framework for learning with individuals, teams and organisations. I am starting to discover what’s most important to me here: trauma and triumph in organisational systems and their relationship to purpose and identity.

I can never underestimate the great range of experience within each client as they move through this process and how vastly different are the experiences for different clients. Brand work at this depth of human
experience requires supervision without question – for the safety of both client and coach/consultant.

Observing myself move through this article was much akin to a mini identity process, and quite an undertaking for me alongside my work and home engagements. I am grateful to John Gillespie and New Gestalt Voices for the support to stay with my process throughout. I started this article feeling inadequate. Reflecting on my experiences, however I have managed to deliver them, has been cathartic and expanding. Through conversations in parallel to this article forming, I have discovered more about the threads of my own identity and what I would like to integrate into my brand. My most prominent revelation is that I am comfortable to call myself a Systemic Brand Consultant... for now.

TraceyKay Coe is a systemic coach, consultant and facilitator with over 20 years’ brand experience. She is co-founder of Finding Nektar, an organisation specialising in transformational brand identity development for individuals, teams and organisations.

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In time, it’s likely we will have set rates for advertising, both in the Journal and on the website. However, at present, we’re offering this service in return for a donation to support running costs – whatever amount you feel is appropriate. If you would like to place an advertisement or post a notice, or have any queries about this, please email: sally@newgestaltvoices.org
We help individuals, couples, families, teams, organisations and communities find improved outcomes through better relationships.

**THE RELATIONAL CHANGE GATHERING**  
**November 30, 2017 | Central London**

The Gathering is an annual opportunity to meet as a community, and we welcome therapists, counsellors, coaches, organisational consultants, activists and seekers from all walks of life. This year’s theme, *The mask that reveals the unlived life: what the body knows that the mind has yet to discover*, will be led by Dr Sue Congram, gestalt practitioner. Through the medium of mask, movement, imagery and expressive art, we will explore ways of working that can illuminate parts of ourselves that are longing to live. Drawing on Gestalt and Jungian theory, Sue will explain the idea of active imagination and the imaginal field, and will discuss the theory and history behind this work, and what you can do beyond the day to expand your own unlived life.

**RELATIONAL ORGANISATIONAL GESTALT (ROG)**  
**Starts December 1, 2017 | Esher, Surrey**

ROG is a holistic and practical approach to facilitating organisational and individual change. Informed by Gestalt psychotherapy, the latest in systems theory and complexity, and other theoretical concepts, it is structured around our SOS (Self, Other, Situation) framework, which holds at its centre the importance of developing and nurturing ethical presence. This programme provides skill enhancing training for coaches, consultants, leaders/managers, OD professionals, facilitators and change agents in any field, and is ideal for therapists and counsellors aiming to move into coaching or organisational work.

**SUPERVISION: A RELATIONAL CHANGE PROCESS**  
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**RELATIONAL CHANGE: COUPLES WORK**  
**Starts January 26, 2018 | Kingston, Surrey**

For practitioners who wish to extend their work into or with couples, using relational principles, this course is particularly suited to those trained as individual counsellors in humanistic, integrative, person-centred, gestalt, TA, process or contemporary analytic approaches. The programme includes a combination of theoretical frameworks, experiential learning and relevant skills, as well as working with embodied process and experimental interventions.

See website for full details and join our mailing list to receive news and updates on all events, workshops, and courses!  
www.relationalchange.org
Please consider completing the Qualtrics GIRL Survey online via this link:

The Qualtrics GIRL Survey contains questions about your therapeutic orientation and experience, your here and now emotions, and the 100-item Gestalt Inventory of Resistance Loadings (GIRL© 2015, A. Woldt & K. Prosnick).

Your participation will provide data for the ongoing research of seven Gestalt styles of contact and resistance processes: Confluence, Desensitization, Introjection, Projection, Retroreflection, Deflection and Egotism. This will contribute to continuing research on Gestalt personality theory and its clinical and educational applications.

The inventory is approved by Kent State University's IRB for level one research on human subjects. Participants' identities are coded and remain anonymous. It takes about 30-45 minutes to complete.

Upon completion of the survey, your seven GIRL raw scores will be calculated and displayed on the survey screen, which can be printed or copied if you want to gain awareness of their meaning, in which case, email: awoldt1@kent.edu

Dr Ansel L. Woldt
Emeritus Professor, Kent State University
Associate Faculty, Gestalt Institute of Cleveland
Practice in Psychology & Counseling, Kent, Ohio, USA
PGI Pacific Gestalt Institute is pleased to support the New Gestalt Voices project. We encourage new writers to raise your voices!

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PGI offers post-graduate, advanced clinical training to licensed psychotherapists, registered interns, or graduate students enrolled in a program that leads to licensed psychotherapy practice. Organizational consultants are also welcome. Instruction is offered by a faculty of certified gestalt therapists with considerable experience in training, teaching, and supervising beginning through advanced level therapists.

Pacific Gestalt Institute
1800 Fairburn Avenue, Suite 103
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www.gestalttherapy.org
Many trainees in the Gestalt community did training but did not complete to UKCP registration. WPP is putting together a Psychotherapy Completion Programme for these members of our community. Trainees on application will need to produce a Portfolio of evidence to recognise their prior learning. This Portfolio will form the basis of their UKCP application.

THE PROGRAMME
The programme will be built for each applicant based on fixed and optional modules. For some of these modules you will be joining other WPP trainees. Attending UKAGP events can count towards training hours for this programme. This will be a 2 year programme as you will need to be a WPP member for 2 years prior to applying for UKCP registration.

There will be **FIXED** modules:
- Introduction to WPP and HIPC UKCP
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There will be **OPTIONAL** workshops to complete, that the trainee can select to meet each training standard:
- Transference
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- Attachment
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ENTRY REQUIREMENTS
To apply, the trainee will usually need to have logged:
- A minimum of 450 POST GRADUATE training hours with a UKCP member training institute
- A minimum of 100 hours of client work
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If the above does not apply to you or you are timed out then, depending upon how long it is since you were in training or seeing clients, we will ask you to do our foundation year first and then we will build a programme with you.

This is not a conversion from a counselling course to a psychotherapy qualification. If you are in any doubt please make contact so we can discuss your training needs.

**COURSE WILL START AUTUMN 2017**

For more details please contact Mel Ovens at:

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New Gestalt Voices would not have got off the ground without tremendous support from the international gestalt community, not only those involved directly but also many other therapists, coaches, trainers, and organisational practitioners who have donated funds. Below you'll find a list of the people and organisations whose generosity has enabled us to set up this website and produce the first issue of the journal.

We intend to continue developing the NGV project on a very tight budget. While members of the editorial team are volunteers who give their time freely, nevertheless, there are unavoidable ongoing costs we must meet in running the website and publishing the journal. If you feel inclined to make a donation, it would be very helpful and greatly appreciated!

For those who represent a gestalt training organisation, or individuals who offer workshops or other events, services or products for practitioners and trainees, we’re happy to feature an advert in our events and notices section, both on the website and in the journal, in return for your support. Simply click on the image on this page, or on the website, and then insert the amount you’d like to give. Please add a short note in the app's message box if you want to run an advert or notice.

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Many thanks for reading this very first issue of *New Gestalt Voices!* Much energy has gone into creating it, and we’ve learned a lot in the process. All feedback is most welcome, and suggestions for improvement will be gratefully received. Email your comments to john@newgestaltvoices.org.

So this gestalt is complete. A new one begins. The second edition of the journal will be published in January 2018. You’ll find details of the different ways in which you might contribute, and the various deadlines for the journal, on the website.

And finally, we have a question for you: what is a gestaltist? Answers by email to sally@newgestaltvoices.org. We’ll be publishing your responses, be they witty, erudite, or anything between, in the blog as well as the next edition of the journal.

www.newgestaltvoices.org