

# GESTALT TODAY

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# Editorial

Lidija Pecotić

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## Welcome to the second issue of GESTALT TODAY MALTA: International Interdisciplinary Journal in the Field of Psychotherapy.

This issue marks the achievements of the second International and Interdisciplinary Congress of Gestalt Therapy, organized and hosted by the Serbian Association for Gestalt Psychotherapy. This was held under the title *“Human being and the processes of change – Implications for Gestalt therapy and related disciplines”* in Belgrade, Serbia, from the 15th to the 17<sup>th</sup> of September, 2017.

More than five hundred participants from ten different countries had the opportunity to follow over forty presenters from the field of Gestalt therapy and related disciplines. We were all honored by the well attended Congress and even more so, by the atmosphere of togetherness and excitement of experiential and academic learning of contemporary themes of Gestalt theory and practice, challenged and supported by presentations and workshops led by the interdisciplinary team of presenters.

The keynotes of some presenters are used as significant contributions to this journal issue. The high level of participation and engagement has inspired us with new ideas for our next Congress, culminating in the creation of our newest Congress title, *“On Becoming a Psychotherapist: Experiential learning for a better world”*, which will be held in Macedonia, in 2019.

In this issue we are continuing our tradition of interviewing personalities from the ever-growing field of Gestalt therapy to discuss the development of Gestalt therapy in Malta and abroad, highlighting and recording significant moments in its history which could otherwise easily slip into the background and become forgotten. We would like to once again express our thanks and appreciation to our International and Maltese contributors, Joyce Sciberras and Katya Caruana, for their generous commitment to this traditional event, for interviewing Bertram Müller and his wife Johanna Müller-Ebert on their Gestalt journey and contribution to Gestalt history, theory and practice.

Other key contributors include Rose Galea, who puts forth her treatise on experiencing advances in the digital world and its influences on psychotherapy, particularly the nature of the therapeutic relationship.

Jean Marie Robin presents his view on key changes in the practice and theory of Gestalt therapy. He also reflects on the evolution of the different types of changes from a field and relational perspective.

Michael Vincent Miller contributes the long-debated issue in philosophy and psychotherapy about the nature and theory of Self. His work focuses on language and posits a fresh way of understanding the function of therapeutic dialogue and the changes connected with it.

Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb continues with the second part of her original paper on Psychotherapy in Postmodern Society and Lidija Pecotić, focuses on the topic of change using different Gestalt theory concepts and neuropsychological research. Our last contributor, Katya Caruana, with her poetic speech, opens our hearts to remember and promise to maintain our ongoing commitment to contributing to a better world.

I end with a sense of connection and gratitude to all those who work, write and continue to read the *Gestalt Today Malta*. A final word of thanks goes to Mikela Smith la Rosa, our assistant editor, for her dedication and enduring work on our journals which are developed through her tireless commitment and passion for this project.

At this time of political birth of our profession it is reassuring to feel part of an international Gestalt community and its written word.

# An Interview with Bertram Müller and Johanna Müller-Ebert

Joyce Sciberras and Katya Caruana

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This interview was held on the 3rd of November, 2017 in Malta, by Joyce Sciberras and transcribed by Katya Caruana.

Joyce: Welcome Bertram and welcome Johanna. I feel privileged to be interviewing you. Sharing your experiences with us is valuable and important. It helps us understand Gestalt history, particularly how Gestalt Therapy evolved in Europe. I wish to share with our readers the setting of this interview, we are here on the terrace of this lovely hotel, nice weather, overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, in Malta. Bertram, you have strong connections with Malta, as we know you have been invited to teach in workshops here for many years now. What I would like to ask you first is: How did you come across Gestalt Psychotherapy? What pulled you towards it?

Bertram: I think it was the power of an unexpected, authentic encounter with other people and with myself, which I experienced in my first Gestalt workshop in 1969 in San Francisco. I bumped into Gestalt by accident, perhaps by intuition. I was a 23-year-old student of theology and philosophy, hitchhiking around US and Canada, sitting close to San Francisco in a VW Bus, full of hippies, when one asked me: "Oh, you are a German? Do you know Gestalt Therapy?" I said: "No." Next day, instead of following my plan to go to the Golden Gate Bridge, I called the number they gave me. A Gestalt Institute San Francisco answered. They offered my hitchhiking girlfriend and I a full scholarship for a weekend Gestalt workshop after we told them that we are poor German students. Without that fortuitous encounter and generosity, I definitely would not have become a Gestalt therapist.



Fig 1. Bertram's large family.

These two days of Gestalt experience changed my life script. I was so struck by what I experienced that I just kept on going to find out what Gestalt is about and what it would mean for my life. The first evening of this workshop scared me to death. Blind walk, exploring other people with your hands, touching and later speaking about your feelings, sitting mostly in a circle with about fourteen people whom I did not know, and one master of ceremonies and facilitator to help us express ourselves while in contact with others. Since I grew up in an academic family with nine mostly elder brothers and sisters, we often got heavily involved and committed in discussing political topics, while

hardly ever sharing much of our personal experiences and feelings. With these foreign people I soon felt less lonely than I often did in my big family.

Joyce: This was obviously a new and exciting experience!

Bertram: In the end, we hitchhiked back to New York. I decided to stay another 6 months to learn more about this new hippy world of the late 60's in America, especially New York.

Joyce: What did you discover there?

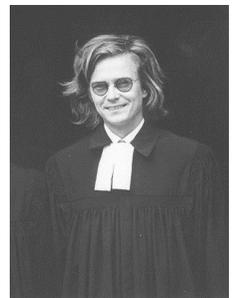
Bertram: I stayed in 84th East Street near Central Park with an American friend of my family not knowing how close I was to where Isadore From and Laura Perls lived. My hosts had a lot of books, others I bought like writings of Rollo May, the works of Maslow, Harvey Cox, Sam Keen, Paul Goodman, Fagan & Shepherd's book 'Gestalt Therapy Now', as well as books from Perls. His book 'In and Out the Garbage Pail' shocked me at first, until I found out how courageous this book was to write so openly about himself. Whenever I afforded it, I went to many theatres: The Open Theatre, the Kitchen Theatre, as well as to music performances and galleries in Greenwich and Soho. From these experiences I took home new impressions of art which had a subsequent big impact on me later when I developed a Cultural Centre in Dusseldorf. This evolved in the 80s, also with the help of Isadore From, towards teaching and performing modern art and dance. These were some of my new experiences in America. I came back to Germany as a moderate hippy, with long hair and colourful shirts and jackets, praising Gestalt, Timothy Leary, the emerging psychedelic culture and the new human growth movement. In Heidelberg the so-called student revolution was going on. This was when I met Johanna who at the time was an active member of the student parliament.

Joyce: Oh, Johanna where you involved in that movement?

Johanna: Yes. One main focus, besides to be against the Vietnam War and other forms of political madness, was about what was the best way to get rid of the German after-war authoritarian more or less, fascistic minded people and political structures. We were the so-called 60s generation of free life, of experiments and new experiences. There were basically two parallel Movements. One was the political radical left activists' one, who even made later severe bombing attacks according to their motto: destroy what destroys you! The other, to which we belonged, promoted the concept of an inner change of your personality, with free sex (as the first generation who had The Pill), a free independent life, and open to all kinds of psycho-experiences. So, we were a part of an overall culture of change, in our case supported through Gestalt and encounter. All kinds of experience and experiments and enjoyment were hip, and Gestalt became one of the leading journeys to this state of transformation of one's personality growth.

Joyce: Interesting memories of transformative times Johanna! Bertram, how was it for you to be back in Germany, your home country, after your experiences in America? What did you bring back with you?

Bertram: When I was back I first had to finish my study in Theology and Philosophy. It was a torture to finish this complex and difficult study, I did not believe in it anymore. In my spare time, I worked as a 'Gestaltist' in the first Free Clinic for drug addicts. I had no clinical experience, yet the clients liked my style of communication and my Gestalt experiments, and I felt reassured that I am on the right track. Immediately after my exam I started to study psychology in Bonn. Johanna did the same. In Germany, in order to be allowed to practise psychotherapy, you had to have an academic qualification in



*Fig 2. Bertram as a protestant minister before becoming a Gestalt Therapist, 1973.*

medical or psychological studies, as well as at least four year post graduate training in a recognised therapeutic approach like Psychoanalysis. Gestalt was not recognised at the time. We had faith that it would one day. Since I had to earn money to survive, I started to teach religion at a high school, which at that time meant mainly sexual education. Meanwhile we started to organise Gestalt workshops in Bonn while we were still students. We invited American teachers, because there were no qualified Gestalt trainers at that time in Germany.

Joyce: Aha, so you were initiators in this area of Germany, pioneers who brought Gestalt teachings and experience to Germany.

Bertram: Yes. We had to. We had to organise our training in Gestalt Therapy for ourselves. Later we found out, that Rolf Buntig had also started to organise Gestalt workshops in Munich with teachers from USA. Hilarion Petzold, who was quite an ambitious and intelligent man, started to organise workshops and training programmes in Gestalt Therapy under the name of 'Fritz Perls Institute' all over Germany and Europe. He was seen as very ambiguous, since he was viewed as promoting and taking over all kinds of humanistic methodologies to be integrated into his own quite complex therapeutic concept which he called Integrative Therapy. Gestalt therapeutic concepts were only a part of what he was promoting. We saw ourselves as the keepers of the grail of authentic Gestalt Therapy!

Joyce: Interesting! This was history in the making.

Bertram: At that time the only way to get training in Gestalt Therapy was to invite trainers from abroad. The 'Gestalt trainers', this is what they called themselves at that time, did not teach in a usual clinical way, nor claimed to be clinical therapists. To claim this would have very likely been an illegal act in Germany. At that time, Gestalt was seen more as an educational methodology for human growth. Gestalt Therapy did not enter in Germany in the 70s and 80s as a profound clinical psychotherapeutic approach. Such circumstances were a main reason why Gestalt was not seen, until recently, as a powerful therapeutic concept to be integrated into clinical contexts. To get a more continuous training in Gestalt I first went to Amsterdam. There emerged a Stitching Centre for Gestalt where I further nourished my enthusiasm for Gestalt therapy. All the money I could possibly save, I invested in Gestalt workshops. Johanna went to Rolf Buntig for her first Gestalt experience and I drove also several times to Bavaria for a workshop with Jim Simkin in the early 70s and later went there to my first 5-day workshop with Erving and Miri-am Polster.

Joyce: Did the Polsters come to Germany at the time?

Bertram: Yes, all of them. To teach in Old Europe seemed to be very attractive to them. Jim Simkin was a big shock for me. He came from Esalen in California, at that time still the Mecca of the Human Growth Movement. I experienced him very harsh, even cruel, provocative from the first moment. He was kicking participants out of the workshop, because he 'felt poisoned by them'. I'll never forget the picture of a big eagle head on the front side of his t-shirt. This and other expressions of 'authenticity' I did not like and could not take. I never saw him again.

Johanna: His wife, Ann Simkin, from whom he lived in separation, was a different person, supportive, gentle, inspiring. I invited her to come to Düsseldorf to work with a women liberation group of which I was the initiator. In the early seventies the situation in Germany was somehow quite different to live as a woman. Being a woman meant that you didn't have the right to have your own bank account without the permission of your husband. As a wife you could not sign contracts on your own and you were not allowed to take on a job without the permission of your husband. I wished to get a different kind of support from my husband.

Joyce: Did she inspire you?

Johanna: Yes! Yes, we felt supported to trust our own experience more!

Joyce: To fight for women's liberation.

Johanna: Yes, but not in a politically activated way, but to become more self-confident, and to take self responsibility to do your own thing!

Joyce: Aha. I have a personal memory of those experiences as well and I also identify as being an initiator in that field!

Bertram: Similar inspiring experiences we had with the Polsters, who worked together as a couple, the brilliant minded Miriam and heart- and careful Erving Polster. Since we were also a couple eager to learn how to co-lead Gestalt workshops together, they gave us an idea how to work and teach in a co-supportive and co-creative way. Not easy at all, but in the first years it was not easy to find another co-therapist around than your own partner to run a group.

One of the most self-healing encounters for me at that time was with Bob Martin, who was introduced to me by the Polsters. He did not become well known in Europe, because he died early. It was he who opened my heart in a psychophysical way of warm sensations, to feel and to express myself with my body and so much with my mind. The work with him was something special.

Joyce: In what way did he touch you so deeply?

Bertram: Well, it was his gentle, caring presence with a real person-to-person encounter in a somehow spiritual way, hard to describe in words. I was ready to open up. I felt my heart turning warm, feelings of love and of acceptance of who I am. It was a kind of a secular American way of enlightenment. I never will forget these spiritual moments with Bob.

Johanna: Before he left Germany, he got involved with one of my closest girlfriends, married her soon after, but never came back to teach for us. The same happened to another teacher, Sid Geshenson, who worked with us for about three years, married another best girlfriend of mine and member of our women's liberation group.

Bertram: With our growing Gestalt community in Bonn we urgently needed someone to teach us continuously. At the seminar with Simkin I met Sid. He was a Californian older, soft hearted, good father type of Gestalt Therapist. His working style was mainly through Gestalt encounter. We worked on the floor, sitting on mattresses, mostly engaged with caring, sharing and touching. We even massaged each other, were taught to do morning yoga exercises like stretching as a way of greetings to the sunrise and how to chew up your breakfast muesli with full awareness. Altogether this was quite a different kind of learning to a regular postgraduated academic program. For us it seemed for a while to be the best to lose our academic mind and come more to our senses! It was purely experiential, a direct way of integration of emotion, sensations and willed intentions, delivered fresh, directly from California, which at that time was the centre of human growth movement and not yet the circle of virtual reality.

Joyce: I was going to ask more about that pure experience.

Bertram: By slowing down the process of our awareness, following the switching focus of your eyes and ears and senses you heighten the pure awareness in the Here and Now. The painful memories are fading, and the fear of the future does not rise because the Now is timeless presence. This gave me often the experience of lightness, joy but also a feeling of power of myself. With Sid we were also supported to express

our aggression which was a focus of Gestalt therapists following central concepts of Perls and Goodman. We learned to hit a cushion to express anger that we felt against someone like our father, mother or other monster fantasies: a technique we would hardly use anymore today.

Through Sid, we were introduced to Ischa Bloomberg. Ischa also came from California and eventually resided in Great Britain. He came over for 3 years together with Wendela ter Horst, a tall, austere woman from the Netherlands, as his lover and assistant who soon later worked as an independent trainer in Gestalt Therapy. Both were quite influential within the Gestalt training scene of Germany (Bonn and Berlin) and also in Great Britain during the 70s. In the context of our first training institute Gestalt Institut Rheinland (GIR), which we founded as a non-profit organisation, he gave many workshops which I organised. At the time, I thought that he did not like me! I felt awkward in front of this kind of authority. Yet I mention him, because he was the first who upon asking him began giving some theoretical comments on the work he did. This was something new, after several years of pure Gestalt-self-experiencing. Ischa later went to Italy, restored a ruin in the countryside near Florence, with the help of some students. After attending two more workshops there I never went back.

Johanna: Ischa did some very fine work with me. Within 3 hours of work, I lost my weekly migraine attacks which I had since the age of 14!

Bertram: I'll never forget this work. Ischa had asked her to lie down on her back and asked all the other group members to hold her down with both hands. She soon expressed a lot of anger while we continued to keep her down. This was not easy for me to do! I wondered, did this anger emerge out of her past experience, or because she was just forced (even though with her own acceptance) to be pushed down backwards on the floor by 12 people?

Johanna: It meant to slow me down. I could really feel and express my own and full force.

Bertram: Oh yes, she did! She was very strong, we had trouble to keep her down. This technique was not unusual at that time. I would never do it as a therapist, but it worked!

Johanna: This experiment was a crucial one for me, risky to lie down, to surrender, I also cried a lot but with a feeling of relief.

Bertram: Through Ischa we were introduced to Isadore From, who used to come since the middle of the 50s every year to travel through Europe, though never to Germany, due to the Holocaust. When he met us and the Gestalt group in West-Berlin, he changed his view of the German people.

We were eager to get more profound theoretical background of what we are doing as Gestalt therapists. Why this and not in a different way? "Intuition is good. Informed intuition is better!" was one of Isadore's mottos. Like no other we had met before, he could teach us in a fluent exchange of experiential therapeutic work, units, combined with theoretical comments. His comments were not only addressed to the other group members, and not like a talk 'about', but at the same time were delivered as therapeutic interventions on an intellectual level to the client at work.

It was a kind of Gestalt "Lehranalyse" (teaching analysis) in the context of an advanced student group. His teachings were brilliant, clear, on the spot, not spectacular at all, but sustainable in a way. He somehow simulated in you an idea like a tiny seed, which you noticed much later was growing. When he ended most of his teaching in the US, From came two to three times every year to teach his "European Gestalt Training Group" and usually a second one with Peter Dreitzel in Berlin. Members of our exclusive European group



*Fig 3. From the left, Johanna, Isadore and Bertram at New York Brooklyn Bridge.*

were: Manfred Josewsky from Cologne, Jean-Marie Robine, Bordeaux, Noel Salate, a Canadian, who lived near Cannes, Elke and Emilio Lorusso from Florence, and we both from Düsseldorf. One condition of Isadore was that we had to meet in the most attractive cities in Europe with guaranteed good restaurants, like Cannes, Florence, yet mostly in Paris, and Düsseldorf.

When we asked him, after 6 years of training (1978-1984) with him, whether he could give us a signed written confirmation that we had worked with him, he said: "No! I don't want to be the authority to tell you that you are ready to work as Gestalt therapist. It's all about your own decision and responsibility." Much later he gave in, after a nice dinner!

Joyce: What kind of person was Isadore?

Bertram: Isadore had a Jewish background. He often used some Yiddish words, but he was not a believer. He was, as he would say, quite small, like Charlie Chaplin, who after work he liked to imi-tate. He wore thick glasses, sometimes eye lenses to "show his beautiful blue eyes", smoked, almost without interruption, some kind of green looking small cigars. He liked to read the New York Times and he liked good food. He expected to be invited after the workshops to one of the best restaurants in town. It was a kind of ritual, mostly quite expensive but also beneficial for us, because we learnt a lot about him and the history of Gestalt Therapy, as well as how to choose a good restaurant and to comfort yourself after work! He started the evening in a New York style, with an American Martini on rocks, he never ate a lot, but enjoyed the presentation of several courses and the social conversation in between.

Joyce: Who is the most influential person in your Gestalt training life? Would that be Isadore From?

Bertram: The most influential on me becoming therapist was indeed Isadore. Besides being the best teacher of the theory of Gestalt Therapy, Isadore taught for example, that one cannot undo the loss of the Ego function without first focusing on the disturbance of the Id-function, on what one is sensing and feeling and on the Personality function, on who you are and want to be right now, until the "Ego is emerging to function by itself again, light like a butterfly flying away". Johanna and I became committed to further elaborate his overall concept of diagnostics which was consistent with the theory and methodology of Gestalt Therapy. We also followed Isadore to see Gestalt Therapy as a holistic approach. Gestalt Therapy includes body, mind and the soul.

Isadore was for me the first Gestalt therapist by whom I feel supported. He saw my creative part. I remember I worked on a dream. All that I saw in the dream I described it in bright colours. Probably also from how I described the different parts of my dream, Isadore picked up a creative side of myself. I felt deeply understood and connected to a resource of myself I did not pay attention too much until then. This is just one little example of how I experienced Isadore as my most important teacher.

Isadore offered to me and others what we needed to work on as a Gestalt therapist in a clinical setting. He taught us to combine a sensitive therapeutic interaction with brilliant comments and explanations on every intervention he was doing. He made in his teaching references to psychoanalysis, a lot to Otto Rank and of course to Husserl. He taught us how to transform phenomenology into therapeutic practice. We learned a lot about where Gestalt came from, and how and why we differ from others. We had a lot of friends involved in psychoanalysis at that time. My younger sister and several good friends of ours were psychoanalysts. So, we could discuss with them as colleagues and as heavy opponents about little, but important, differences.



Fig 4. Isadore From's house on the left. Bertram and Johanna's on the right. St. Mondane Dordogne, France.

For a long time, I strongly identified with Isadore. Until years later, when I was teaching I realised that I used phrases he often used, and I even spoke with the intonation of his voice. I wonder how long complete assimilation took until it became a part of me.

Joyce: I can understand how privileged you feel to have had such an experience with Isadore...

Bertram: Isadore also invited us to visit him in his cottage in the Dordogne, South of France, which he kept as a very simple equipped house, which he bought in the 50s for fifteen thousand Dollars. Next to it there was also another ruin, which we managed to buy from 24 French heirs.

Johanna: Since it was only me who spoke French it was my job to organise the restoration of this ruin, which took about 4 years. We became good neighbours, caring and sometimes cooking for each other. Isadore wrote in a letter to us: "I feel overworked (...) it's as if too many people want to see me before I quit. But I suppose, I should be grateful. But the truth is, that friends are much more important to me than my work, and through my work I have gotten to know people like you two".

Joyce: I can see that you got to know him very closely.

Bertram: Yes. A year after his death, the *American Gestalt Journal* organised a conference on "Images of Isadore" in Boston where we were both invited to give a speech. It was a very special moment, particularly to meet all the American Gestalt and European colleagues, most of whom were former students of Isadore. It meant so much to all of us and was exciting to see so many people who were influenced by him.

Johanna: The half of his ash was brought by Hunt, Isadore's partner, a year later to France and spread in the backyard of our house.

Joyce: That must have been a meaningful process for you as close acquaintances. We can say that part of Isadore is in France and that his influence was spread throughout so many countries

Bertram: Yes. A few more things about Isadore I like to mention: Isadore was teaching in a clear way. His teachings could have been printed easily. Besides some exceptions, he did not allow tape recording. He argued he did not want to support listening to the past, instead listen to me and stay in the Here and Now. One other of his deflecting explanation was, that he could only teach like Socrates in a dialogue of person to person. Indeed, he was great in that. Yet he also mentioned that he had writer's block, too anxious that his teachings turned out to be seen later as wrong. I had made a lot of notes of his teachings. Years after, when he stopped teaching, while we still met in summertime in France as neighbors, he finally authorised what I have put-together into an article as: "The teachings of Isadore From".

Joyce: Endorsed by Isadore himself?

Bertram: Isadore had read my text. He gave it to Hunt, his partner, who was a professional editor, to make some mostly linguistic and stylistic corrections on it. Isadore made one public speech in Germany, on our

theatre stage of the Werkstatt Tanzhaus in Düsseldorf. It was called: The Requiem on Gestalt Therapy. He was extremely anxious speaking in public. Isadore was at the end of his teaching career, worried about the future of Gestalt Therapy. He was dogmatic in his view to teach pure Gestalt as it was first formulated in 1951 by the Perls and Goodman. He said, my dedication, my mission is to teach Gestalt Therapy and not to mix without clear reasons with other concepts and technique because this would spoil the uniqueness and more importantly the therapeutic power of Gestalt Therapy.

My strong identification with Isadore was also caused due to his most delicate therapeutic style and his way of teaching: unpretentious, staying in direct person-to-person contact in the here and now. Often, he waited a long time until he said something, which sometimes seemed to come from nowhere, yet at the right moment as something new for you to taste. When one asked some theoretical question, he could refer each of his interventions to its methodological or theoretic background, mostly related to the theory of the Self of Gestalt Therapy. His teaching was authentic, not private but professional, reflective and authentic. For example: he did not work with an empty chair, because he argued that this would lead the patient away from the direct contact with the therapist. With a smile he called the book 'Gestalt Therapy', the Bible.

Joyce: Oh! Was he the one who termed the book Gestalt Therapy as the Bible...?

Bertram: Yes, like a Bible, not as a book to believe in. The text is written by Goodman in a poetic condensed form, he said, which will be best understood by reading little parts of the text in close connection while sharing real life experience or therapeutic issues. In the advanced years of training with Isadore we spent our precious time with him almost exclusively reading aloud word by word the book "Gestalt Therapy" flavoured with all kinds of associated theories of clinical psychology and practical examples.

Joyce: That's the way to read this book!

Bertram: Most important for me was, through Isadore, I discovered Otto Rank. It took me a long time to work through his tremendous work. I do not regret a single hour I spent reading his most fundamental psychological and anthropological work, for me indispensable for any Gestalt therapist to understand where creativity is coming from and why it's especially so important in the context of psychotherapy. As a German I was able to read books of Rank, which were not translated into English, and to read manuscripts in original German, which were only published so far in English.

Joyce: Exclusive in a way.

Bertram: With support of James Lieberman, the Biographer of Otto Rank ("Act of Will") I got access to the Library of rare books at the Columbia University of NY.

There I discovered the full original German written manuscript of 'Art and Artist' at that time only available in English. It was a completely disordered pile of sheets. Since I could read German, I put this text within a week in the right order. A German publisher was found to make this 'masterpiece beyond praise' (Perls) the first time also available in German. Later other books of Otto Rank followed. We founded a working group on this with our former students together with some open-minded Psychoanalysts, like Ludwig Janus who did profound research on psychic impacts of prenatal experiencing based on Ranks hypotheses of the Trauma of the Birth.

My brother Burkhard Müller, a University Professor in the field of pedagogy, published on Rank's contribution on positive education. We organised the first two conferences in Europe on Rank's contribution to the Humanistic Psychotherapy. Most of the post Freudian concepts of psychotherapy are rooted in or are confirming Rank's insights.

Joyce: You found some affinity between Otto Rank and Gestalt?

Bertram: Yes, a lot. Rank died in 1939. Most of his theoretical and clinical concepts and insights, like the therapeutic importance to pay attention to feelings and sensing, the concept of the Here and Now, the co-creation and object relational concepts of psychotherapy and so on were formulated by Rank long before 'Gestalt Therapy' was published in 1951. Goodman as well as Isadore particularly knew Rank's writings quite well.

Joyce: How else did your reading of Rank inspire your work?

Bertram: Well, close to where we live, there was an old industrial building which was meant to be taken down. Instead, all kinds of artists, dancers, painters and musicians started to make use of this empty space. Some offered different dance and theatre classes. I preferred African dance and modern dance. Soon I got into the role of organising these disconnected activities, to change the space into a legalised non-profit organisation with an unusual new concept. We dedicated this new centre to be, unusually for that time, a place of the foreign art and artist, to be a centre for the development of one's personality through art and communication for amateurs as well as for professionals.

To discover one's own creativity, one's best, and to learn from a real artist to 'catch the fire of the artist in you' was our catch word. In a way we put Joseph Beuys' slogan, "everybody is an artist" into real practice. For us it became the place where we started our first Gestalt workshops at the end of the 70s and later in the middle of the 80s for our own Institute for Gestaltherapy (IfG). During those times we did not earn enough to rent our own room, we worked in this place of art, with dance, actors' studios, a small theatre and a bar restaurant. Later, when we started a training programme, we made it obligatory for all students to take classes with choreographers, actors, painters and pantomimes.

Joyce: So, Gestalt Therapy, together with the influence of Otto Rank and Isadore From inspired you to get involved in art and to open this creative center called the "Tanzhaus nrw" with a big dose of Gestalt philosophy?

Bertram: Yes. After a few years and several changes of buildings, more than 3,000 amateurs and professional students of all ages came every week, to discover their creative potentials supported by artists from all over the world including some Gestalt therapists. So, it happened that as the director of this place I was in charge of a staff complement of about 35 people, more than 50 teachers from 20 different nations and about 120 different performing companies per year. To invite companies, I had to travel twice a month to a performance or festival in Japan, China, South America, US and often to Africa. I created international cooperation networks, and worked as a member of juries for dance in several international organisations. I had to limit my teaching and therapeutic practice until I stepped back after 35 years of doing this most challenging and interesting job in the art. During this period, it was Johanna who did most of the organisation of our Institute of Gestalt (IfG) in Düsseldorf.

Joyce: Johanna, so was it you who held the institute together?

Johanna: We started in 1978 our first Gestalt workshops in this emerging art centre. More people than we expected came to experience what Gestalt is about. It took us until 1984 that we got the State permission to run a training programme for Gestalt therapists. At that time an official law to regulate the practice and training for psychotherapists did not exist, only on the level of a healing profession. But for our Institute (IfG) in Düsseldorf we gained the first official legitimacy in Germany for Gestalt. A lot of paperwork and exhausting meetings but it helped us also a lot be taken seriously by others, by our students and by ourselves.

Joyce: We can say that both you and Bertram are the founders of an important Gestalt institute in Germany.

Johanna: Yes. In Germany one has to do a lot of bureaucratic things. To support our programme we invited the best teachers in the field we could get. We decided to keep the Institute small but exclusive. No more than one new group per year, which was work enough for us, until after 20 years of development, a new law for training in and practice of psychotherapy in Germany destroyed all hope for Gestalt therapists to get official recognition. To keep up our status as state recognised therapists, we had to go through another 3 years of training and examination, this time in a sort of Neo-Analysis, but old stuff for us and a humiliating experience. But we said yes to what we had to do, to gain the legal right to do what we already knew to do: Psychotherapy. The reason of this exclusion of all humanistic concepts including Gestalt Therapy in Germany was not a lack of *scientific* proved efficiency, but the result of a power game of traditional groups of interest.

Joyce: Very interesting and also sad, frustrating and a letdown! Johanna, you met Laura Perls. Did she also give workshops in your Institute?

Johanna: Yes, she did. Besides our Gestalt Training Institute, I organised in addition, a women's Gestalt programme, through which we had the chance to invite great female Gestalt teachers from US to work with us, like Laura Perls when she came in the middle of the 80s more often to Germa-ny. She was very sweet, she could not see much in her last years of teaching, yet she felt the energy in the field.

Joyce: She lost most of her sense of sight??

Johanna: Yes, she lost most of her sight; but she impressed us with her extraordinary sensations and intuitions. She was very present, unspectacular, with a profound sense of aesthetics. What I especially like about her was that she had a profound European kind of higher education, in music, in dance and especially she had a most vivid knowledge of literature, a level on which I could easily communicate with her, because originally, I was a literary scientist before I became a psychologist and psychotherapist. I love reading and to talk about it with others, at that time about feminist literature of the past and present time.

Joyce: Did you work with other female therapists?

Johanna: Yes, with Ann Simkin, who I mentioned already and with Marty Fromm a partner of Fritz Perls during his time in Esalen. She also worked in our women's Gestalt group. When someone was sliding away out of contact while working, Marty used to snap her finger like this...

Joyce: Really?

Johanna: Yes, in front of the clients' face repetitive and she said: "Now and Now and Now"!

Joyce: Sounds somehow too much...

Johanna: Yes, but it was her way to get people to focus on the present!

More bizarre was Barbara Dillinger from LA. She tried to introduce telepathy aspects into her Gestalt work. This was the moment to stop engaging teachers from beyond borders of California. Warm, supportive and with great intuition to get clients in touch with deep emotions was Marianne Fry from Great Britain, who worked for our Institute for more than 5 years.

Joyce: What an experience! How did you go on?

Bertram: In the end of the seventies Gestalt Therapy became a national political issue. Our strong interest

was, to get official recognition for Gestalt Therapy, because we knew, that if this doesn't happen, it will soon be the end of Gestalt Therapy in Germany as a therapeutic concept, people would like to get training in and to work as professional therapists.

Joyce: Yes.

Bertram: Jerry (Gerald) Kogan, who was an American Gestalt therapist, married to a German woman Wiltrud Krauß-Kogan, both were living in Frankfurt, made the first call, to create a network of Gestalt Institutes in Germany who were not connected to the Fritz Perls Institute of H. Petzold.

In 1986 we founded, together with five Institutes: GENI in Frankfurt, most connected to Laura, the IGW in Würzburg, connected with Hunter Boumont and H.-J. Süß, IGG in Berlin with Roger Trenka- Dalton, and two Institutes which were founded by us, IFG and GIR, connected with myself From, and some individual members, like Victor Chu from Heidelberg, and G. Portele from Hamburg. Laura Perls, Isadore From and later Miriam and Erving Polster accepted to become our honorary members. Victor Chu became the first President. He was the only one who had a medical background amongst the founding members. I held the post of Vice-president for 10 years. This was a big step in the political field demanding a lot of personal engagement.

Joyce: Bertram, so you integrated all these initiatives...

Bertram: Yes, we altogether did it under the name Deutsche Vereinigung für Gestalttherapie (DVG). We had a lot of internal conflicts, mainly how to create an organisation with mutual respect of each other's differences and to find the right consensus about several issues, including: the best way to act effectively in the political field of health; whether we should accept students with no medical and psychological academic background; whether we needed to invest more in scientific research to prove Gestalt Therapy as an effective therapeutic approach; what the minimum standards of a full training programme would be in a way that would be binding on all Institutes as members of our new umbrella organisation. These issues created serious conflicts which had to be resolved amongst a number of different people for the sake of the future of Gestalt Therapy as a potentially recognised therapeutic approach. We had a common mission and aim but were also competitors in the market. One advantage of our association was that we had an outside 'opponent close to us' which helped us to unite.

Joyce: Who was this opponent?

Bertram: Hilarion Petzold. He was a very powerful and a most intelligent man. He published hundreds of articles and books on psychological and clinical issues, ready to take over the professional training programme of Gestalt Therapy and other upcoming therapeutic approaches like Psychodrama, Family Therapy, Body Therapy, Bibliotherapy and so on.

Joyce: Of course, it had to be legally formalised. It would be lovely now to know more about the 80s.

Bertram: At the very end of our work with Isadore, Margherita Spagnuolo-Lobb wanted to join us, but it was our last year. Therefore, she could only come to France to see Isadore for individual training or therapy sessions for a couple of hours. She and Giovanni Salonia invited him for a few workshops to Italy. Isadore stopped soon after to teach, in 1985. Margherita invited us later for several years to teach in Rome, Syracuse and Venice the first generation of Italian students of this emerging Italian Gestalt Institutes of Margherita and Giovanni. They both were highly dedicated to develop Institutes in Italy, grounded on the teachings of Isadore. They published an interesting Magazine "Quaderni di Gestalt". Together with Margherita Spagnuolo



*Fig 5. Bertram in the centre and Lidija 5th from the left. Graduation of the first student generation in Belgrade, 1998.*

Lobb, Giovanni Salonia and Jean-Marie Robine (Bor-deaux), we founded the “European It Research Group for advanced theory and practice in Gestalt Therapy.” The first meeting took place in Venice in May 1994, the second in June 1995 in Yenne, Savoie-France and the third in 1996 in Düsseldorf to discuss themes (like time and relation in Gestalt, the language and therapeutic relationship etc... and to support our first writings to be published on Gestalt themes. Each of the directors could invite 5 post-graduate students from their Institute as well as colleagues from other Institutes, like Harm Siemens from Amsterdam. We shared papers during this time but somehow this collaboration ended. I was very busy with my obligations at the Tanzhaus, but maybe it was

also time to step out for a while of the spell of Isadore, who was and remained until today our main spiritual connection.

Joyce: Bertram I would really like to ask you now about how you met Lidija Pecotić and how you became so connected to the European accredited Gestalt Psychotherapy Training Institute Malta (EAPTI-GPTIM) for many, many years now?

Bertram: Yes. Lidija had attended three-day Seminar and public speech which I gave in Sicily. It was a time when I was thinking of limiting my teaching at that period of my life, including teaching in Italy. Our Institute as well as the Tanzhaus became a success and a big challenge. Due to these other commitments I decided to work for several years abroad exclusively for Lidija. Later I was teaching again in Amsterdam, Seoul, St. Petersburg, Moscow and other cities.

Joyce: Lidija invited you to work first in Belgrade in 1996 and in Malta in 1997. This was over 20 years ago and you are still very involved in her training institutes to date. What drew you here to Malta?

Bertram: I was curious to work in a country I did not know yet much about, but more importantly, I liked Lidija’s extraordinary style of how she took care of me as her guest teacher, very sensitive, totally reliable in many ways, generous, easy and a joy to be with.

Joyce: I agree, she is sensitive, isn’t she?

Bertram: I was also impressed with her students: most eager to learn, with a very good academic background and strongly infected by the crucial methodological, theoretical and spiritual dimensions of Gestalt Therapy. This did not come from nowhere. During our decades of working together I learned that Lidija, behind her modest and humane style is a most profound, complex and educated colleague of the first generation of Gestalt therapists and teachers in Europe that I know – always open to learn something new without losing the core of Gestalt Therapy.

However, what makes her, in addition to this, so unique is that she is a most effective diplomat and promoter of Gestalt Therapy in Europe and maybe in the world. I say this with the highest possible admiration. There are some good Gestalt therapists and teachers around. But no one like her was able to build up, with careful, respectful inclusion of other support, an officially accredited and recognised Master Program in Gestalt Therapy amongst other related accredited academic programmes. That is what Gestalt Therapy needed the



*Fig 6. Lidija and Bertram, 1998, Belgrade.*

most. This is what no Gestalt therapist or Institution in Europe could manage like her, neither in Germany in France, or Netherlands, to gain an official recognition for all academic levels to teach Gestalt theory and practice. This is for all of us a most important and heroic act for Gestalt Therapy to survive in the clinical field as a unique and effective form of clinical psychotherapy! Lidija knew this, she made it and she sacrificed a lot to bring this about. I am grateful and proud, at least as much as I felt being a student of Isadore, for being invited for such a long time by Lidija to be part of this historically important process for Psychotherapy, particularly Gestalt Psychotherapy in Europe.

Joyce: I am sure that Lidija appreciates the fact that you have witnessed all the work that she did Bertram. Bertram and Johanna, you had visited Malta before – right?

Bertram: Yes, around a cold Christmas time about 35 years ago.

Johanna: It was difficult to find restaurants that were open and there was not much to do, except to see Caravaggio masterpieces and to take an English styled afternoon tea at a hotel in Valetta.

Joyce: It was a long time ago...

Bertram: Yes, but later to teach groups of students in Malta was very exciting. To experience people so personally, you learn a lot about them and their country and learn to love this island. During my first time that I came to teach, the country had opened up more to postmodern ideas like Gestalt Therapy, yet people were still embodied with their strong Catholic tradition in public and private life. Now they are open to additional perspectives of life and beliefs. At the beginning I was careful about what I was teaching. I did not feel sure as to whether this group member or the other was strongly influenced by the then Maltese authority of morals. I calmed my paranoia down by often using my theological background to bridge the postmodern Gestalt Therapy with biblical metaphors and stories.

Joyce: I was a student at the institute at that time and I recall that you challenged us to widen our perspective, understanding life from a wider phenomenological perspective.

Bertram: I was asked to teach Gestalt theory, about the will and guilt feelings but also about handling sexual issues, of course only in the context working as a Gestalt therapist. Together with Lidija we created new forms of rituals around examinations in order to support the holistic transformation from a student identity into a professional Gestalt therapist. Without at first giving much attention to it, I slipped during those years into the role of an examiner, without thinking about, how this would affect my profile as a supportive teacher, until students told me they are anxious of me. Who was transferring more: me as the one wanting to be liked as a nice fatherly teacher or the students, projecting their back to school experiences finally onto me, in order to get finally rid of them!?

I tried to overcome this conflict by saying: "Feelings like these before an examination are a side effect of too much control of excitement around the indispensable fire of transformation from a student to a professional



*Fig 7. The first official Graduation Ceremony for the NCFHE accredited Master Programme in Psycho-therapy, EAPTI-GPTIM Malta.*

therapist". With Johanna we developed in our Institute in Düsseldorf similar new rituals of endings especially in the context of changes of one's overall identity like during and after an examination. This includes not only a holistic change of feelings, styles of actions and new identifications, but requires also a positive approval by a significant social community, in this case the community of professional Gestalt therapists and friends. Therefore, while taking examinations in Malta and Belgrade, I did not so much identify myself as an examiner but more as a co-moderator of a ceremony of a transformation from a student into a new identification as a professional therapist and as a welcomed new colleague of ours.

Joyce: Bertram, my experience of your workshops is that you use creativity through rituals, experiments and in thinking out of the box. I think that somehow, we get a variety of you in a workshop. I do not only see you as a teacher of theory – I know this is your forte - but also as somebody who is very, very creative in your work.

Bertram: To teach Gestalt Therapy demands a balance between being authentic, lively, in contact with the spontaneous interest of the students as well as to get across the thematic subject of the given themes of the training programme.

Joyce: Johanna, your area of expertise is in ending and separation within the therapeutic con-text. Can you tell us about it?

Johanna: After years of practising Gestalt Therapy, I realised that I did not learn in my Gestalt training much about how to end therapy. From Rank I knew something about his technique of termination of therapy. Besides an essay of Freud, "Analysis Terminable and Interminable" (1937) there was, until now, worldwide almost no literature on this subject. This is astonishing, since the ending of psychotherapy is as important an art as to begin one. I decided to write a dissertation on this subject. I interviewed Gestalt therapists, Psychoanalysts and Behaviorists about their experience and technique in ending psychotherapy. I published this and other books on this subject of ending and separation and created for that special notion: separation competence, related to life, but also as therapeutic knowledge as to how to relate to different forms of ending therapy.

Joyce. May you elaborate further on this?

Johanna: To end something is a part of life, an unavoidable function of growth. To know how to end something is a skill, as important as to begin something. But with ending, most people have more difficulties. Usually because they connect this with bad past experience or even with the unavoidable fact of death. But ending is just a phase of transformation, which is sometimes a challenging impasse to find one's way creatively through the unknown into something new and nourishing. To end something well is an art. One can learn the art to separate from the past. As I suggest in a process of four steps, following the different aspects of the four phases of the Gestalt contact cycle. Such as at the phase of the fore-contact one has some thoughts and feelings of gaining something new from the outside and in the phase of contact one is checking different possibilities. To separate from something, or to change, will work best, if you work through each of the four steps carefully. Rank saw the cause of neurosis due to guilt feelings or anxiety in moments of



*Fig 8. Bertram during a speech in Düsseldorf.*

change. We developed, for our clients, different methodologies and strategies to develop their competence of separation, like from mothers, partners, old cars or habits based on concepts of Gestalt Therapy.

Joyce: Ah, okay, so this is your area of expertise, Johanna

Johanna: Absolutely! Through this research work on *ending*, I am now asked by magazines, televisions and radio stations to give interviews and talks. I hope this helps also to make Gestalt Therapy more known as using most helpful concepts for the daily challenges of life.

Joyce: Yes, that is an opportunity to make Gestalt Therapy more visible.

Bertram: I wanted to say something about rituals, especially about rituals of ending and transformation. All major change of identity happens in all cultures through rituals. A change of identity demands a holistic way of transformation. From my background as a theologian, psychologist and art director, I could assimilate by practising the three main elements of a ritual, the spiritual, as well as the psychological and the dimensions of art. Most rituals of our daily social life became very poor. They lost, for most people, their meaning. Our whole societies suffer from a lack of meaningful rituals especially in moments of change. So, we developed new forms of post traditional rituals, which are based on theories and our western culture of individuality. We developed a basic concept about how to create rituals for special moments of life, like the birth of a child, the moment of becoming a man or a woman, of transformation of being single to a married husband and wife, real new forms of rituals without reference to past traditions, but with a co-creative dialogue with the clients' existential issues and creative will of change. Rituals in the context of examinations are very important. It's a moment when you begin to leave behind being a student and changing into a fully responsible therapist.

Joyce: Yes, I have witnessed your rituals and they are very enriching and also different, acknowledging and celebrating change. Bertram and Johanna, sticking to the topic of ending, I see that we are too moving towards the end of this interesting and particular interview. At this point I wish to mention Katya who is with us. I especially wish to mention Katya, also Gestalt Psychotherapist, who followed and supported the development of Gestalt Therapy in Malta almost from the beginning and who is transcribing this interview. Thank you, Katya. So now, how would you like to close this 'focusing on the past' in a meaningful Bertram like style?

Bertram: Well, basically there is only one thing to say: "Stay the way you are". I want to emphasise how important it is to go on and continue with what Lidija and her supporters in Malta have gained by building a post-qualifying training programme as well as for the official recognition of Gestalt Therapy and the future of Gestalt Therapy in Europe. Therapists and politicians in the field of health services can learn a lot from the miracle of Malta. You managed to develop something, which I think gives new hope for the further development of psychotherapy and more particularly of Gestalt Psychotherapy.

Johanna: I too would like to express my admiration, what you have established here in Malta for the sake of all people in general and for Gestalt Therapy. Thank you so much!

Bertram: In the past Gestalt Therapy was a part of a cultural development within the western world, to support people to develop their individual personality and lifestyle. For the collective and dependent oriented people, after the two world wars, this was the right therapeutic focus. In the future I think, we have to look more on the social side of life's creation. The need of this switch was seen by Fritz Perls in his last year, when he left Esalen and bought, in 1969, an old Motel at the Lake Crowichan on Vancouver Island, to create new

forms of living in communities, which would at the same time support individual growth. The growing lifestyle to live more and more with and in a virtual reality will make it more than ever necessary, to support our clients and people in general, to stay in contact and learn to communicate with real people. I fully agree with Erv Polster's ideas, which he outlined in his latest book "Beyond Therapy" to create "life focus community", were people learn to communicate, to simply live in empathic ways with each other.

Johanna: We see more and more clients who live isolated, mostly as isolated singles, with limited life experience such as, how to share, how to fight, how to create compromises, how to find meaning for themselves, to practice social ethics and to balance their will with the interests of others in the real world. They need to develop their ethical identity based on I-You psychology we learned from Buber and Rank. They need to live in real life with others, to learn to live with the benefit of the new technologies and to control them instead of allowing this virtual reality to take over the control of their human lifestyle. As we know, to create a worthwhile, aesthetic and ethical style of living it's not so much a matter of the mind, it's not about following rules, it emerges in an aware contact with the other and nature, it demands finding compromise with others and the nature around.

Joyce: Beautifully verbalised.

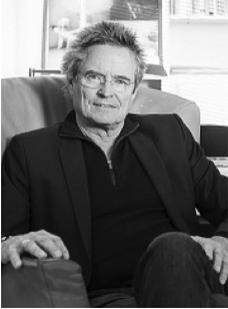
Bertram: Beyond individual therapy and engagement in community development we, as Gestalt therapists need, more than ever, to get socio-politically engaged. To live in the future in peace and in harmony, we are asked as citizen to fight for human rights and justice as Paul Goodman taught us. This includes the right to practise and to teach Gestalt Therapy, which is still not the fact in many countries. We need to remind ourselves and our colleagues that it is one of the most unique and important contributions of Gestalt Therapy to human psychology, that feelings and acts of aggression are an unavoidable aspect at the contact boundary in order to balance the difference of our needs and ideas with the resistance of the outside world. To support people to express their anger, their interests and their boundaries, should be one of our future missions as Gestalt therapists. This could help people not to turn their most valuable life impulses against themselves and turn depressive, or deny and project those feeling onto cynical leaders or supraindividual power systems, who destroy the social, cultural and natural grounds to live an individual, meaningful and socially dignified life.

Joyce: Thank you very much Bertram and Johanna. I feel privileged to have had this conversation with you. Thank you for leaving a legacy of a great passion for Gestalt Therapy. We will all benefit!



## Joyce Sciberras

Joyce Sciberras is a Gestalt psychotherapist presently working in private practice, as well as a supervisor and teacher at the Gestalt Psychotherapy Training Institute Malta. She trained as a social worker at the University of Malta, later obtained a post graduate Diploma in Gestalt Psycho-therapy from GPTIM and was awarded a Master's Degree in Gestalt Psychotherapy from Birmingham University. She attended a training program in Family Constellation in the tradition of Bert Hellinger led by Lidija Pecotic PhD. She is a qualified Family Mediator. Joyce held the post of Vice President for seven years at the Church Agency that offered voluntary counseling. She was a member of the Board of Governors of the Malta Mediation Center for eight years. She was a member of the National Family Commission for eight years. She is regularly invited on television programs to discuss topics related to psychology and psychotherapy.



## Bertram Müller

Bertram Müller works as a Gestalt psychotherapist in private practice in Düsseldorf and as Gestalt trainer and supervisor in Germany and in several European countries like: Malta; Serbia, Italy, Croatia, Netherland, Russia. He has academic degrees in Philosophy, Theology (1973) and clinical Psychology/ Psychotherapy (1981). Since 1973 he was trained in Gestalt Therapy in Europe and USA with Ischa Bloomberg, Lore Perls and Isadore From (1977-1982). He was a founding Vice-President of the German Association of Gestalt Therapy (DVG), founding president of the German Otto Rank Association (DORG), and founding member of the European League of the Institutes of the Art (ELIA). He was a founder and artist director (1979-2013) of the Tanzhaus NRW (Northrhein/Westfalia); President of the European Dancehouse Network (EDN). He was honored with the "Chevalier des Art et des Lettres" (1991) by the French Minister of Culture and Education Jaques Lang as well as with the German Dance Price/ Deutsche Tanzpreis (2014). He published articles on: Gestalt diagnosis, Gestalt methodology, Gestalt education and coaching, the concepts of the will by Otto Rank and in Gestalt Therapy, the teachings of Isadore From as well as on artist and cultural development.



## Johanna Müller-Ebert

Johanna Müller-Ebert; PhD; Dipl.-Psych. works as psychotherapist, gestalt therapist, supervisor and author in private practice in Düsseldorf. She has academic degrees in literary science in Heidelberg (D) and Geneva (CH) and Psychology in Bonn and Berlin (D); She had Training in Gestalt Therapy since 1973 with Ischa Bloomberg, Laura Perls and with Isadore From (1977-1882) as well in Neo-Analytics (1997-99); in Body-therapy, Trauma therapy (EMDR) and Hypnotherapy (Milton Erikson Institute) Heidelberg. She is Co-founder of the Institute for Gestalt Therapy (IfG) Düsseldorf, as well as the 'German association of Gestalt Therapy' (DVG); She works as therapist, coach, supervisor in individual and group settings as well as a lecturer in Psychotherapy and Pedagogy. She is author of several books and articles including about the art of ending psychotherapy; professional competences on separation; change and a new beginning. She gives seminars, speeches and interviews in public institutions, radio, TV, and magazines on these subjects. She is Member of national associations of: Ge-stalt-therapy (DVG); Trauma-therapy (EMDRIA); Hypno-therapy (Milton Ericson Association (MEG)). [www.dr-johanna-mueller-ebert.de](http://www.dr-johanna-mueller-ebert.de)

# Contemporary Psychotherapeutic relationship

## Online therapy or face-to-face?

Rose Galea

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### Abstract

In the past decades, we have experienced advances in the digital world. Psychotherapy is being offered online, and the therapist and client meet over the internet, perhaps even in different countries with different time zones. Is this changing the nature of the therapeutic relationship? The objectives for this paper are to reflect upon the role and healing elements of the psychotherapeutic relationship and whether these same elements change when psychotherapy is conducted online.

### Key Words

Online psychotherapy, role and healing elements, changing therapeutic relationship.

The digital world has changed our way of being in the world. Since the creation of the internet in the 1990s the world has become smaller, connections easier, and time and space began to take different meaning. This has also brought on changes in the interpersonal connectedness. Indeed, with the introduction of the internet, the ideas of the therapeutic encounter between client and therapist has also started to take a different meaning. Within the safety of our therapeutic rooms, we cannot ignore what is happening outside the room, which ultimately changes both the therapist and the client. With the advent of the internet, several challenges concerning the therapeutic relationship have emerged.

Along these years, e-therapy has developed. In the beginning we had therapy which was given through emails, later on in the form of chatting and today we have different forms of real time online connections through apps such as 'skype' and facetime. Within this framework, the question that arises is: "Has this changed the nature of the therapeutic relationship?"

In order to try and answer this main question this presentation will be divided into two main parts. First I will look at the recent literature and studies that are emerging about online therapy, and later I will

reflect upon my own experience as a gestalt therapist and the theoretical concepts related to the therapeutic relationship that I find as helpful in my understanding of healing. Additionally, could these elements be applied to online psychotherapy?

## Part 1

In the recent past, studies have been done to inform us about the effects of online therapy. The idea of conducting therapy at a distance is not new. Indeed Freud and Jung both used the medium of letter writing to their patients. Telephone hotlines for suicide prevention started in the 1960's and has continued to expand to cover many areas of mental health. Psychotherapy by telephone remains popular, often substituting inperson sessions for crisis intervention between sessions. Despite the lack of visual cues, studies suggest that telephone psychotherapy is effective and liked by clients.

A number of studies have shown that online therapy can be effective in reducing client's presenting problems (Cohen & Kerr, 1998; Day & Schneider, 2002; Glueckauf et al., 2002; Hopps et al., 2003; Lange et al., 2001). On the other hand, some authors have argued that there is uncertainty about the possibilities to re- create the important qualities of the fact-to-face relationship that lead to change in an online environment without the benefit of the contextual and non-verbal cues.

Kowacs (2010) describes that with the use of the internet and other means of distant communication, the therapeutic alliance can continue in the case of prolonged travels, disease and certain types of activities which make the meeting in the therapeutic room difficult to achieve. She continues to explain that with the possibility of the use of online therapy, feelings of exclusion and abandonment temporarily stop to exist, gratification is immediate and limits are abolished.

Vece (2015), a gestalt psychotherapist offering online Gestalt Therapy, describes that in order for therapy to work it has to be with a trusted therapist within a comfortable environment for the client, therefore claiming that there is no reason why this could not be achieved through online psychotherapy.

According to Rehn (2011), when a client is meeting a therapist for the first time it is more comfortable to meet online rather than having a consultation in an unfamiliar office. She claims that the attention that words and language receive when they are conveyed from a position of comfort and in a familiar environment like home, can be the positive aspects of the online therapy. Other aspects that the author gives as hindering someone in face to face therapy and which are overcome by online therapy are shyness, and difficulty to speak, in which the client then can type their difficulties. Similarly, Reidbord (2013), writes that when the alternative is no psychotherapy at all, then the use of conducting it online is obvious, he continues to give examples of people that could benefit from online therapy such as those who are bedridden, those living in inaccessible locations those with contagious infectious disease, and those with immunocompromised disorders.

Contrary, Lisondo (2012) claims that sessions through Skype, Webcams and VOIP do not ensure good overall perception, because the lower body and the environment are not seen. Additionally, he argues that access to these states are needed in an intimate face-to-face relationship in which sensorial signs may be transformed by the therapist and client. He continues to question the use of computers and asks what happens to the contemporary concepts that invest intensively in the therapeutic relationship, such as the therapeutic field, and intersubjectivity, which construct the fine and delicate affective tuning of the therapeutic alliance.

Furthermore, Trotta (2011), discusses the possibility of the individual who through the online virtual process may develop omnipotent fantasies of sidestepping time and space, with the implication of sidestepping the principle of reality.

Having considered the above literature and studies on online psychotherapy, I will now move on to the second part, where I will explain my reflections on the subtle elements of the therapeutic relationship which I find as reparative and healing in the therapy encounter. Concepts such as phenomenology, I-thou relationship, countertransference, intersubjectivity and mirroring will be looked into.

## Part 2

The phenomenological method is the direct methodological implication of the paradoxical principle of change, and it is equally paradoxical. When it is practiced in therapy, this method, allows the therapist to be open, to receive whatever and however the client shows himself, both verbally and nonverbally. This receptivity results from the therapist's caring for the client as a person and her genuine curiosity about how the client lives now and has previously lived through time and circumstances. Phenomenology involves, an understanding of what reveals itself which draws on a theoretical framework (Fleming, 2001).

The phenomenological method uses theory to organise and explore what is revealed, honoring the revelations themselves as primary and the therapist's thoughts about them as secondary. Nonetheless, in the therapeutic situation, the therapist brings to the meeting with the client a ground of learning and experience. This influences what she notices what becomes foreground in the revelations of the client, and gives rise to spontaneous dialogic responses by the therapist. Looking at the phenomenological method, the question that arises, is whether the therapeutic field used during online sessions would reveal the same elements as when a face to face session is conducted.

## The dialogical relationship

In dialogical relationships, what is essential is not what goes on within the minds of the partners in a relationship but what happens between them. Buber pointed out that to become aware of a person; is to perceive the person's wholeness, which includes the spirit; from which all utterances, actions, and attitudes are perceived and recognised as signs of uniqueness. Dialogical psychotherapy, is centered on the meeting between the therapist and her client as the central healing mode. If the therapist uses techniques, it is not "healing through meeting." Only when it is recognised that everything that takes place within therapy (silence, pain, anguish, quiet sighs, micromomentary facial expressions, dilated pupils) takes place within the context of the vital relationship between therapist and patient do we have what may properly be called dialogical psychotherapy (Amendt Lyon, 2003). What is crucial in dialogical psychotherapy is the healing through meeting. It is what takes place between the therapist and the client; what Aleene Friedman (1992) called "The Healing Partnership." And it is these subtle micro-elements that might be missed in online psychotherapy, and the question still remains whether online therapy is conducive in achieving this?

## Countertransference and mirroring

Along with the concept of the I-thou relationship, I feel that it is also important to discuss the concept of countertransference and mirroring. The term countertransference has been increasingly used to describe nearly all the emotional reactions of the therapist to the patient in the therapeutic setting. Such reactions may be either a block or an aid to understanding—a tool for better understanding the patient.

(Ursano, Sonnenberg & Lazar, 2004). Certain theoreticians have written that for the transference to flower, the therapist must be a willing recipient of what the patient puts forth in the therapy room (Ogden 1995).

Moreover, in the controlled therapeutic setting, the transference relationship can allow the patient not only the vitalising energy, but also the context within which to observe her social “blindness”. Through ‘mirroring’ which refers to the projective process of seeing in the other what one cannot see in oneself, the patient can perhaps experience positive and safe mirroring self-object functions that could be internalised (Spiegel, Severino, Morrison, 2000). This ‘mirroring’ has implications on the reparative healing aspect for the client. When the client feels that she is being accepted and contained by the therapist, she would be able to accept the self in a more positive way.

Fonagy and colleagues (Fonagy 2001; Fonagy and Target, 2000; Fonagy et al. 2003) see change not via transference interpretation but through the therapist’s holding in mind the unwanted process in the patient until the capacity to mentalise is induced in the client through the relational transactions (Harris, 2005). This is similar to Buber (1990), who claims that in the time of the strongest transference, the patient needs, in his unconscious, to give himself up into the hands of the therapist so that contact may occur. The therapist’s openness and willingness to receive whatever comes is necessary so that the patient may trust existentially. Would the quality of the transference be the same when using online therapy, as opposed to face-to-face therapy?

## Intersubjectivity

Intersubjectivity is the capacity to share, know, understand, empathise with, feel, participate in, resonate with, and enter into the lived subjective experience of another. It is a form of non-magical mind reading via interpreting overt behaviours such as posture, tone of voice, speech rhythm, and facial expression, as well as verbal content (Pearson, Cooper & Gabbard, 2005). Such a capacity is, of course, a crucial aspect of the work of psychotherapy, which assumes that the therapist can come to share, know, and feel what is in the mind of a patient, in the sense of what the patient is experiencing. Moreover, the patient expects (hopes and fears) that the therapist can and will do this (Stern, 2005). What is most interesting about the intersubjective event, is the “now moment– moment of meeting linkage” and that it does not need to be verbalised or interpreted in the usual sense to have its therapeutic effect. The intersubjective field gets implicitly changed, and this alters the therapeutic relationship, transference, and countertransference. Therapeutic work begins again from a new starting place (Stern, 2005).

Moments of meeting are the points of nonlinear change in the patient’s implicit knowledge, just as an interpretation can create a change in the patient’s explicit knowledge. The two are complementary and very often act together, with the moment of meeting confirming the interpretation. Now moments and moments of meeting are products, par excellence, of the intersubjective dialogue. They are the fruit of the sloppy, nonlinear process of two people working within an intersubjective matrix. It is in this way that the intersubjective perspective widens, complements, and, on some points, challenges the classical approach, both clinically and theoretically (Stern, 2003).

The idea of the ‘good-enough mother’ in the psychotherapeutic context, constitutes a basic model for the therapist’s healthy attitude towards the patient. Therefore, providing a holding environment, so that the client might have the opportunity to meet neglected needs and allow the true self to emerge (Rodman, 2003). Winnicott proposed that the therapeutic setting itself, in its stability, reliability, and soothing quality, represents the “holding environment” that was prematurely disrupted. He contended that the therapist must provide, by her own stability, reliability, and availability, the “environment mother” that the client lacked in the past. The therapist’s tolerance of the client’s need to regress, to be understood in regression, and, symbolically

speaking, to be “held” by the therapist may permit the reactivation of early traumatic circumstances and therefore, the undoing of the defensive withdrawal of the true self (Kernberg, 2005). Providing these aspects within the boundaries of the therapeutic environment facilitates healing for the client. As therapists, stability, reliability and availability could be provided in both circumstances of therapy, however, would the quality of the ‘holding’ be the same when there is a screen in-between?

## Conclusion

For some clients the experience of therapy will be their first experience of being truly listened to, attended to and understood by someone who takes their thoughts, feelings and needs seriously. As Zinker (1975) points out: Our deepest, most profound stirrings of self-appreciation, self-love, and self-knowledge surface in the presence of the person whom we experience as totally accepting (Zinker, 1975: 60).

Much research still needs to be done on the outcomes of online therapy. As has been stated previously, it is indeed a better option when there is no opportunity for face-to-face sessions. Recent research has shown that certain behavioural changes could be obtained through online therapy.

However, research on psychotherapy outcome reveals that clients attribute successful therapy to their relationship with the therapist rather than to technique. The concept of the dialogic relationship, which include an attitude of genuinely feeling/sensing/experiencing the other person as a person (Heyner & Jacobs, 1985), might lose its quality in online therapy. Nonetheless, as psychotherapist we cannot ignore the world outside the therapy room, which impinges directly or indirectly on therapist and client and acknowledge that perhaps it is the right time to face the new challenges and integrate both worlds.

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## Rose Galea

Rose Galea started her career as a nurse. However she later continued studying and graduated with a Bachelors Degree in Psychology. She continued her studies in Psychology and obtained a Masters Degree in Clinical Psychology. In addition, Rose Galea trained in different schools of psychotherapy. She finished a Masters Degree in Gestalt Psychotherapy and she is also an accredited EMDR therapist. Rose Galea also obtained a post graduate diploma in integrative supervision.

Rose Galea is a clinical psychologist, psychotherapist and supervisor, who works in private practice. For a number of years, she worked within the mental health system and was a member of different multidisciplinary teams which gives her a lot of experience in the area. Rose was one of the professionals involved in the setting up of the Crisis Team in Malta, and for a few years she was the clinical psychologist within the team. She worked at primary, secondary and tertiary level mental health, and has a lot of experience in working with clients who suffer from chronic mental illness.

Rose Galea is also a Senior Visiting Lecturer at the University of Malta, at the Faculty of Health Science and she facilitates teams of medical students in Medical leadership training. She also teaches psychotherapy at the Gestalt Psychotherapy Institute Malta.

# About some changes in Gestalt Therapy and some changes with Gestalt Therapy

Jean-Marie Robine

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## Abstract

In this brief article, I offer a look on some issues connected with the topic of change: changes in theory and/or practice of Gestalt Therapy and how these changes could have an impact on a patient's evolution and openness to different kinds of changes. Two major topics are outlined: the field perspective and the relational dimension of psychotherapy, and the aesthetics as an expression of the philosophical grounding of Gestalt Therapy.

## Key Words

Gestalt Therapy – Change – Paradoxical theory of change – Relationship – contact – Gestalt prayer – Aesthetics – Field – Situation – co-creation – Egotism – Individualistic paradigm

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That the world is endlessly changing is a truism. The environment of each of us changes. Consequently our interaction with it also changes. Contemporary men and women are not the same as those of the fifties – when gestalt-therapy was created – since basic relational modalities are different. Thus pathologies are modified, implicit or explicit concept of health and of maturity evolves, and psychotherapeutic models are transformed.

I cannot make a comprehensive overview of these changes in the world during these past 65 years, nor of the changes in the theory and practice of gestalt-therapy, nor of the changes or supposed or expected changes of our patients thanks to their being in gestalt-therapy. So I'll limit my talk to some aspects of two major topics which I'll gather according to two qualifiers : relational and aesthetic. I suggest that, with respect to these 2 themes, Gestalt Therapy has taken an important step forward. We have to be careful, however, not to lose our epistemological foundation, and I invite you to pay attention with me to some possible shifts in meaning.

## A few words about our original context, first

Many sociologists have shown that, at the time of Perls, it could be difficult to separate oneself from alienating or dysfunctional belonging to family, social groups or institutions. In this context, Perls could propose his so-called 'prayer':

I do my thing and you do your thing. I am not in this world to live up to your expectations and you are not in this world to live up to mine. You are you and I am I, and if by chance we find each other, it's beautiful. If not, it can't be helped. (Perls, 1969).

Today, we might be horrified if we understand this out of its historical context: it could be understood as an invitation to egocentric hedonism, to egotism, even to join the culture of narcissism which was so characteristic of the late twentieth century.

However, Isadore From, a member of the group that founded Gestalt Therapy and my teacher during several years, explained something important about egotism. During the course of a therapy and for the sake of the work, egotism could be seen as a necessary phase in a kind of 'experimental neurosis' much the same way as 'transference neurosis' in psychoanalysis could be considered as an "experimental neurosis" that provides an essential tool for the on-going work. "What do YOU feel? what do YOU want? What do YOU choose?" and so on... This consciousness focused thoroughly on oneself is both a stage and a modality necessary for the work; but the difficulty is to dissolve it later on, allowing other contact modalities to develop. Such dissolving can be difficult, just as transference neurosis can be difficult to solve in a psychoanalytical context; moreover, we can meet such perverse effects of unfinished gestalt psychotherapies through such claims as "I do it this way because it's good for me. I don't care about outcomes for other people. If it's not OK for them, for you, that up to them, up to you!"

Roughly at the same time (1970) Arnold Beisser published his famous article, "The Paradoxical Theory of Change". It is still a major reference in many Gestalt Therapy schools. Beisser summarizes his theory in these words: "Change occurs when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not." (p. 77). We can easily recognize the resemblance between this and the famous comment, "Become who you are," that Nietzsche had borrowed from the ancient Greek poet Pindar and placed in the very heart of his philosophy. This sentence has always struck me as ambiguous and can be understood in many ways. For instance, is it possible that who I am supposed to really be, exists but remains hidden inside? Would an internal self exist, that is different from what I reveal in my daily life? This is similar to the way some people speak of their inner child. Is it possible to be somebody else other than oneself? Let's remember this famous joke ascribed to Oscar Wilde: "Be yourself, everyone else is already taken". All these formulations are far from a phenomenological approach.

Yontef and Schulz (2016), in a recent article, translate what they understand about Beisser's paradoxical theory:

In order for fundamental and lasting change to occur, a person must become more aware of who he or she is. When someone identifies with their state of being, i.e. how they feel emotionally, how they experience their bodies, how they think, what they choose and how they behave, then this person is in touch with their existence. (p. 11).

But what strikes me while reading Beisser again, almost 50 years later, is the absence of any “other”. It is clear that, in the gestalt-prayer, as well as in this theory of change, we are in a “one-person psychology”, that is, an individualistic one, and that the ensuing therapeutic work will be intrapsychic. For example, Beisser leans on the Persian concepts of ‘Top-Dog’ and ‘Under-Dog’ which are a way to name what is supposed to occur inside the psyche. This concept doesn’t mention the necessity of a contact with the other for growth and change to occur.

## **Here is the first and main contemporary change in gestalt-therapy : field perspective as a reference**

Of course, this perspective was already present in our foundational text and in the teaching of the first trainers, but it was more a slogan than a reality embodied in clinical practice.

In the fifties, I assume that it could be difficult to apply a field methodology in psychotherapy the way we can do today: some theoretical and practical steps had not yet been covered. Today, this concept is widely spread and used as a reference, but it covers a multitude of different understandings and practices.

This interest in the field seems connected with a contemporary craze for the concept of ‘relationship’. This concept is now in the foreground and most psychotherapies claim to be ‘relational’, at least when they consider that the relationship supports the therapeutic process.

Our difficulty is that gestalt-therapy has never defined what ‘relationship’ means. Our theoretical construction is built on ‘contact’ and many gestalt-therapist behave as if what our founders said about contact could apply to ‘relationship’. Gestalt Therapy is based on contact, the psychoanalytical construction on ‘transference’, the systemic one on ‘interaction’ and so on. Other approaches are based on projective identification, attachment, transaction, etc. All these concepts could be part of a definition but, as far as I know, a complete and consistent definition of relationship still remains to be made. For me it’s not enough to speak about dialogue, usually with reference to Martin Buber, to understand what relationship means. “A genuine exchange, one in which there is an inherent egalitarianism and a fundamental reciprocity of influence” as Yontef would say (2016, p. 12) is not enough.

It’s true that many investigations have shown that “relationship” is the main factor for the success of a therapy. But what aspects of the relationship? I cannot forget that we can also say that relationship is what is at the origin of all psychological pathologies. Therefore being focused on ‘relationship’ is not enough to define working in a field perspective.

Another very common contemporary myth can be summarized by 2 letters: CO. Nowadays, everything is ‘co’-something: co-construction, co-decision, co-creation etc. For me this is mostly demagoguery: to pretend that there is “egalitarianism and a fundamental reciprocity of influence”. That the therapist is transformed by every therapy session the way the patient could be transformed is a myth, an illusion, a white lie. And this so-called egalitarianism drives some therapists to practice self-disclosure as much as the patient does, symmetrically and indiscriminately. Of course I would not be who I am today without my many years of practice and many encounters which have contributed to my evolution. But I am afraid that this “CO” could create an illusion of similarity, of equality that Martin Buber already had denounced in his dialogs with Carl Rogers (Anderson, 2010).

A worker, a plumber, an architect and the client who orders the building of his house according to his desires, are partners in this situation. Co-construction? Once the house has been built, the worker will

quickly forget the few dollars he received for his work, the plumber and the architect the thousands. They all will have some more experience and skills. But the owner, living in such a home, desired, chosen, expected by him, will probably experience a huge change in his life. Were these people co-creating? Of course, I also agree with the ground which supports this fashion of the “co”. This co reveals that henceforth we are conscious that in every moment, in every action, in every word that I utter, the Other is present, the other is influential, the other is active. Yes, the Other co-creates with me.

Winnicott was famous for many reasons; among others, his claim that “There is no such thing as a baby but only an indivisible entity baby-environment.” He made this comment almost 10 years after the publication of Gestalt Therapy. However, in different words, Gestalt Therapy already claimed something similar, not only for the baby but for any living being. This is what PHG had called the “organism-environment field”. But the field is not a thing, it is not an entity: it is an epistemology, a way of experiencing the reality that we always are in a process of union and differentiation, the endless ebb and flow of what occurs between organism and environment, which is called ‘contact’, and which also could be called ‘life’.

Sometimes the concept of ‘field’ is confused with the concept of situation, for instance when some therapists (gestalt-therapists and more recently psychoanalysts) speak of a “common field”, or a “co-created field”. Even Lewin made the distinction when he was writing: “Since the field is different [...] for every individual, the situation, characterized by physics or sociology which is the same for everybody, cannot be substituted for it.” (Lewin, 1952, p. 240) And Lewin adds: “It’s important to know the physical conditions because they limit the variety of possible life spaces (i.e. fields) – probably as boundary conditions.”

That’s probably why Perls and Goodman defined psychotherapy as being primarily a situation. In their words, “The clinical becomes an experimental situation” (PHG.p. 430). Did you notice that the word “field” enters almost 150 times in PHG, while the word “situation” more than 450! 3 times more! So the issue becomes: how can I create a situation which could have a therapeutic impact on my patient’s field, (i.e. atmosphere, physical and social context, modalities of contact, and so on) and on everything which goes into the making of the situation?

I can organize – or organize with my patient or any other – the situation we are experiencing. In the same time, myself and this other will be organized by this situation. So I can introduce in the situation events, words, actions, rules, questions and comments, surprises and so on which could enact my therapeutic function. And I can hope that something from this situation will help my patient to organize her field in a slightly different way, will help her to open a new gestaltung. In her field, I am a part of her environment. During a session, I probably (hopefully?) am the most significant and influential part of her environment. But it’s herself and not me who can manage her understanding, who can manage her differentiation/individuation process. I give her some material, consciously and not consciously, deliberately or not, but I have no mastery of what she will take or not.

A lot of research has been and is being done about what happens in psychotherapy. In one of these studies, psychotherapists and patients were asked separately about important moments which were openings for changes in the client. Such events and moments cited by each of them are not the same. The client selects some specific moments, the therapist some other ones, and they don’t match. For me this illustrates the difference between situation, which is common because we both create it together and are created by it, and organism-environment field, which is a different experience for each partner, even if you integrate some parts of my contribution and I integrate some parts of yours.

Let’s try to define “situation”. I insist on my word: “I try”.

A situation is created through the perception - by all involved protagonists - of some elements of the field of each of them. This perception structures the context of their encounter, gives meaning to it, and implicitly defines the modalities of their interaction. It is a space-time event constructed and limited by each of the actors who, simultaneously, are constructed by it and by the definition that they give to it. Of course, memories, emotions, affects, and so on of each of the participants, since these are part of the field of each of them, contribute to the acting and reacting in the situation.

So, I would say that a situation is created by the intersection and the interaction of the fields of each of the involved protagonists. The immediate and selective perception, by each one of the implicit organization of all the actors' fields, organizes the situation.

As Beisser reminds us: "The Gestalt therapist rejects the role of 'changer'" (p. 77). We cannot change the other. We can only offer opportunities to experience a different situation through experimenting other modalities of contacting because our own contribution to the creation of the therapeutic situation is specific. We can hope that the outcomes of these experiences will allow the patient to organize her field differently and to be organized by it differently and creatively.

The individualistic model was typical of the needs and values of a specific and bygone era. Maybe the contemporary needs and values developed by some gestalt-therapists through the field perspective could also be considered as a correction, a repairing of some ills generated by the individualistic model. Now, as therapists, we need and look for more solidarity, more attunement to each other, more mutual support and more belonging instead of self-sufficiency.

The therapeutic situation needs to be reconsidered through these parameters. Moreover, this change is also a social and political choice. I claim that the therapeutic relationship ought to be considered as a prototype, a laboratory for social change. One of my books is entitled "*Social Change Begins with Two*". This notion could be considered a utopian view. However, I believe in "transduction", a concept that explains how transformation is gradually propagated, step by step, from parts of a domain or world which are already transformed to parts not yet transformed.

## **The second important change in our way of thinking about Gestalt Therapy is the concern with an aesthetic paradigm.**

This direction had been suggested and promoted by Laura Perls when she claimed that "gestalt" is a concept which belongs to the aesthetic vocabulary and that this leads us to draw certain conclusions: "The fundamental concepts of Gestalt psychotherapy are philosophical and aesthetic rather than technical." (Laura Perls, 1989, p. 133). As far as I know, Michael V. Miller and myself, without knowing each other at that time, were probably the first authors to write on this theme in the early eighties, Michael with "Notes on art and symptoms" in 1980, and myself with "Aesthetics of psychotherapy" (1983). It's very touching to be associated with him in the opening of this conference, all the more so since we became close friends.

What is there to understand about this reference to aesthetics, a perspective which is now prevalent in our community?

Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy which has arose during the Eighteenth Century espousing the idea that all knowledge is not acquired only by thought and logic, knowledge can also be gained through the realm of the senses. Originally, aesthetics was defined as the science of sensory knowledge. (When we speak of 'anesthesia', we don't think of 'absence of beauty', of course, but of deprivation of our capacity to

feel). So, referring to aesthetics does not mean referring to beauty or that Gestalt Therapy is an art. Art is one of the possible domains in which aesthetics can be 'embodied' and thus became exemplified.

Thus, we are invited to ground ourselves and to ground our therapeutic work in this sensory dimension, taking us first to what we perceive and feel. And this is not limited to the fore-contact stage in the sequence of construction of a gestalt, but also pertains to how the process will take shape, how a form will be formed, and how the contact will become a form. Maybe you have noticed that, in our foundational text, the entire vocabulary to characterize a 'gestalt' is always made of adjectives connected with aesthetics. The basic criterion of health, according to Gestalt Therapy, is the capacity to create forms or gestalten. Even our name duplicates this definition: Gestalt Therapy means that we practice a therapy of gestalt, i.e. a form-formation therapy.

Viktor Von Weizsäcker (1933), one of the German founders of medical anthropology, wrote that: "Form is the place where an organism meets its environment" and Dewey (1934), the American pragmatist, added: "Form is the way in which we shape and integrate our experiences". It is form that selects and intensifies spatial and temporal aspects of perception and of action. The need for form and the experience of development are intimately linked: development is the organizing of experience over time, and form is what renders the nature of this organization explicit.

One could say a great deal more about the use of this aesthetic paradigm in psychotherapy and in psychopathology. Instead of looking at symptoms and psychopathological experiences as illnesses, we can look at them as forms that people have been able to create, given their situations. Since their present situations have changed, we can try together to create new forms, new flexibilities, new adjustments. As Laura Perls puts it: "By accepting and coping with 'what is', [man] transforms and transcends the situation and achieves true freedom" (Perls L., 1992, p. 191).

"Our existence is embodied in a succession of constantly developing and changing situations we are embedded in, sometimes unexpectedly. To be situated, to be an integral part of a situation, is tantamount to existing as a human being." (Buijtendijk, 1954) "The structure of a situation is the internal coherence of its form and content" claimed PHG (1994, p. 114). Thus, it is both our task and responsibility to define the situation in such a way that we can apply aesthetic criteria when structuring experience.

The field paradigm opens new perspectives and forces us to create new definitions of every concept. Aesthetic criteria combined with our focus on contact processes allow us to avoid what can be a risk in an individualistic perspective: to become Pygmalion-therapists, therapists who would shape or mold their patients and would fall in love with their own projections. Instead, according to the aesthetic emphasis, a psychotherapist creates with his patient new modalities of subjectivity in the same way as an artist creates new forms from the available material. However, subjectivity can be defined only in relation to another subjectivity; that's why contact is our primary concept and assembles field perspective and its concrete application, situation, with the aesthetic paradigm which takes us out of the medical reference and situates us inside the framework of aesthetics, and therefore in philosophy.

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# Reflexivity and Contact

Michael Vincent Miller

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## Abstract

In this paper I will take up a set of questions of special importance for thinking about change in psychotherapy: These questions centre around the long-debated issue in philosophy and psychology about the nature of the self. Does it even exist? If it can be said to exist, is it embodied with solid characteristics? Or is it purely an artefact of consciousness and language? In Gestalt Therapy the self is an emergent process only coming into being through contact with others and the world. The theory I will be setting forth builds upon this last idea with the aim of bringing it more precisely into the realm of language, especially the reflexive properties of language when these are understood as a form of action. These considerations provide a fresh way of understanding the purpose and function of therapeutic conversation in bringing about change.

## Key Words

contact, reflexivity, self, organism-environment, language, speech acts, growth.

Well over 40 years ago, when I was still in graduate school and subsequently in my first teaching job, I was in training workshops in California with Fritz Perls, generally regarded at that time as the founder of Gestalt Therapy. These days we know the history a little better and include Laura Perls, Paul Goodman, and Isadore From among the founders. One day, during a break in a workshop, I had a question about what it is like to be a therapist under certain difficult circumstances. I went up to Perls and began my question: "Fritz, do you sometimes find yourself...?" Before I could get any further, Perls responded in his thick German accent, "I don't find myself," turned his back and walked away.

Of course, I felt crushed and embarrassed. Perls, I thought, was telling me, "I don't have to look for myself, I simply am who I am." This is the true existentialism, I thought, and he is a fully realized individual, especially compared to me.

Now, all these years later, both I and Gestalt Therapy have developed further. Nowadays I would say back to Perls, “Yes you do, Fritz. That’s exactly what you do. You find yourself. Over and over, moment to moment, you keep on finding yourself. That is why the sense of self never stays the same, but keeps changing.”

Fritz Perls was a brilliant innovator and an incomparably creative although rather impatient therapist and teacher. He was also a determined individualist. His views became more and more individualistic after he left New York, after the book he wrote with Paul Goodman and Ralph Hefferline, and when he went to California, land of stoned existential individualists. We owe Perls a great deal. But Gestalt Therapy itself has changed. It is no longer individualistic.

What I would like you to notice is the particular structure of this sentence, “You find yourself.” It has the most basic sentence form—a subject, a verb, and an object. But the peculiarity of this kind of sentence is that the subject and the object both refer to the same person— oneself. In the grammar of English this is referred to as “the reflexive,” and it stands for the phenomenon of reflexivity, meaning to refer something back to oneself. A complete sentence consists of a subject, a verb, and an object. And we are given to constructing sentences that consist of “I” as the subject, and “me” or “myself” as the object. In this way, we are able to treat ourselves as both subject and object at the same time. This is how self-love, self-hate, self-esteem, etc. are usually expressed. Such reflexivity, as it is called, seems to be peculiarly human. The reflexive may have other names in other languages, but so far as I know it is a universal linguistic form. What I want to address here is the important role that the reflexive, combined with some other themes, plays in the ongoing creative discovery of oneself. And I insist that from the standpoint of Gestalt Therapy, whatever self is, it has to be discovered and to keep on being discovered.

If we consider the theme of change in psychotherapy and ask what and who changes, then we need to ask what part the self plays in change. Do we even need the self in our theories and thus inevitably in our practice to understand how people change, especially in that progressively expansive form of change called growth? Growth and transformation, after all, are the kinds of change most important for psychotherapy. In taking up this question, I want to reflect on the nature of self and, a little later, set forth a couple of new ideas about the processes through which self is involved in change.

Prior to Gestalt Therapy, views on the self fell on one side of a threshold or the other. There was the view that placed the self only inside yourself. That would be a version of Cartesian dualism or idealism in philosophy and psychoanalysis in psychological theory. But if self can only be found inside oneself, it can not change or grow because nothing new can be added to it that nourishes and expands it. You can’t feast on your own organs, as Isadore From always liked to point out.

But neither do you find yourself primarily outside yourself. That would be dualism from the other side of the Cartesian split, namely empiricism in philosophy and behaviorism in psychology. If self is treated like an object observed as if from outside, it tends to become reified, that is, to become thing-like and fixed, without the vital principle of all living beings that enable them to develop and to grow.

Gestalt Therapy resolves this dilemma by defining self as emerging from contact. Contact is an event that occurs neither inside nor out. It occurs at that meeting place or threshold called the contact boundary. Thus, self in Gestalt Therapy becomes a phenomenon of the between, even a bridge between our inner lives of feeling and passion, intellect and imagination that also enables us to cross over into profound give-and-take with a world of others to whom we attribute their own feelings, ideas, imaginings as well.

Contact implies that nothing about experience is simply given; it has to be continually made. Therefore, nothing about experience of self stays the same. It has to be made through contacting what is

not yet self but is always in the process of becoming self. Self is a joint venture between organism and environment, a connection between your person and other persons, between yourself and themselves. It is made again at each meeting, and therefore is a temporal ever-changing process. Just as you can't swim in the same river twice, you can't step into the same self twice.

Gestalt Therapy came up with a very rich, convincing view of how we grow through our meetings with our environment. The self as an agent and instrument of contacting grows and changes even as it is made and remade in the very act of making contact. And, since growth is the main concern in psychotherapy, emphasizing that it occurs at the point of contact makes a revolution in the practice of psychotherapy by profoundly refocusing where therapist and patient pay attention in order to create something new.

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I want here to offer some ideas that clarify and sharpen this process of creating an ever-changing self by bringing to bear concepts from three different fields — cognitive psychology, linguistic theory, and a special area of contemporary philosophy. Not too many concepts— don't get alarmed—just one from each. These are: attention, which takes you to the world for contact; reflexivity, which describes how our attention is curved back on ourselves; and finally speech acts, which show that language is not only representation or symbolization but a form of action. My interest is in how all three work together in creating and re-creating this phenomenon we call self.

My own first step adding some new perspective in this view of Gestalt Therapy is to privilege "attention" over awareness. Perls, Goodman, and most of those who have followed them, have taken awareness to be the faculty that brings us into the present moment. And it is true—awareness guides our perceptions and feelings to what is actually present. In this regard Gestalt Therapy shares a basic outlook with Buddhist meditative practice.

But awareness is a relatively passive function, by itself more onlooker or spectator than creator, though it can be a brilliant motivator of creativity. To be sure, one's sense of self is changed by becoming aware of what's present instead of, say, being lost in regretting missed opportunities in the past, or being gripped by worry about the future. In this respect, a spectator watching a play is changed if she is moved by a scene in the play. But I think it's more accurate to give the spectator a little more agency and say that the change is brought about by her shifting her attention. All experience has to be made, even that of being a spectator, and attention has a key role in this making. These simple examples are in an area where the difference between awareness and attention is minimal. But it gets larger.

For me attention, not just awareness, is the active force in creating something new. Awareness is like the sky. It opens everything up, fog and mist are cleared away, and it receives what is actually present. But it has neither force nor direction. Attention is more like the specific things crossing the sky—clouds moving gradually, flocks of birds moving fast, flashes of lightening even faster. It has both force and direction. The capacity to shift our attention is what directs us toward that which we want to contact. I think of attention as awareness plus intentionality, in the sense that phenomenologists define intentionality, namely a subject directing a perception, feeling or thought toward an object in a manner that unites or connects subject and object. And it is this connecting that creates something new.

Here are examples that demonstrate how important attention is. Love is at bottom, a form of attention. It is the giving of one's full appreciating attention to the being of another that moves you to the

desire to be close, to physical affection, or to compassion, or care-taking. When your partner feels unloved, he or she doesn't tend to say "You're not aware of me,"; the usual way it's expressed is "You don't pay attention to me." At least I've heard it said that way probably ten thousand times in forty years of working with couples in therapy.

Prayer is equally a form of giving full attention to one's belief in a higher realm—it takes the form of reverence or worship. Therapy means giving full attention to how a patient makes his or her suffering. Within all these particular forms, attention does the work of selecting a foreground against a background. We call this Gestalt formation. Therefore, attention has a hand in shaping one's experience of reality. You could think of attention as the paintbrush of reality.

Attention readily goes toward the world. You can observe this in a baby or an animal. But we also develop early in childhood a unique ability to curve our attention back from the world toward our own functioning, especially on the operations of our own mind. We can shuttle back and forth between attending to the world and attending to oneself such that they seem to operate at the same time. This is the action of reflexivity. At this point we return to the realm of language. Because language, especially reflexive language, doesn't merely describe but underlies and propels the sense of self and its growth.

Focusing attention on oneself is exactly what is reflected in the grammatical reflexive. Remember that I said earlier that in the case of the grammatical reflexive subject and object represent the same person. The reflexive expresses a sense of self in language much older than today's psychological terminology centered around "the self." I think that the reflexive tells us much more about how self is made.

The noun "self," standing alone, has been primarily a contribution of the English language to culture and psychological theory. The word "self" is much more familiar both historically and in many present-day cultures as part of the reflexive, which is a compound word—myself, yourself, herself, etc. In fact, "self" didn't exist as a stand-alone noun in English until relatively recently. It is still not translatable into many languages in that form, because no corresponding word exists in them.

I pointed out earlier that the most basic form of a sentence consists of a subject, which expresses or does something, a verb which describes the subject's action, and an object, which is the recipient of the verb's activity. Subject, verb, object. The object can be something out there in the world, which is the possibility of contact, or the object can be myself, which is reflexivity. These two forms of object work together to create the continually unfolding sense of self. They may operate in a cycle of rapid succession or they may occur simultaneously, but either way, taken together they constitute our consciousness of being ourselves, our awareness of being aware, our paying attention to ourselves paying attention. This doubled and redoubled experience, like mirrors reflecting mirrors, keeps taking you to the world for contact and returns you to yourself with something new. In the process the object "yourself" and the subject "I" are both changed.

Attention is creative: it takes us to contacting the world and shaping figure/ground relationships. In the sentence structure, it is the work of the subject "I" as active agent through the verb acting on an object in the world that shapes experience. But this does not yet fully address the growth of self. Replacing the grammatical object in the world with oneself, and therefore a return to oneself that contains the fruit of contact is necessary for creating a new sense of self and therefore is essential to growth. This is the work of the reflexive.

Contrast this with the famous cogito of Descartes — "I think, therefore I am." Look! No object! Just two subjects, both of which are "I," and two verbs, "to think" and "to be." Given this formulation, no wonder

that the subject and his or her action stays as if inside and makes no contact with environment. But what kind of existence is this? It has absolutely no way of getting out of itself to contact a world, except to ask God for help, which is what Descartes ultimately does.

From our standpoint the cogito is a kind of mental anorexia without any source of nourishment from an environment for growth. Even a one-celled animal, such as a protozoan, goes to the environment for nourishment. You could say that Descartes' cogito is fundamentally neurotic—static, repetitious, without growth or transformation.

The pure reflexive, without an intentional object in the world, can be useful at times, such as in “I calm myself,” “I restrain myself,” “I trust myself,” “I stand up for myself.” On the whole these are preparing oneself for contact. But the pure reflexive can also go into making a neurotic sense of self, isolated, as in “I hate myself,” or “I will kill myself.” The reflexive without contact can only create repetition. It makes the same thing over and over again without transformative growth, whether in the form of paranoia, obsession, narcissism and so on. Repetitious reflexivity is the essence of neurosis. It can't get to the actual world anymore than one can see on the other side of a mirror or through the lens of one's projections.

Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, came along and taking off from Descartes, restored the object to the sentence through his concept of intentionality. He thus brought back the world as inextricably linked to the subject “I.” Merleau-Ponty went even further, insisting in his late posthumous work that the “I” is always embedded in the world and the world in the “I.” So there can be no pure reflexivity, except maybe in sleep and dreams or in trance states. Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's reframing of Descartes is close to where I want to take things with my version of reflexivity. I claim that the very idea of reflexivity posits a world of otherness.

For example: When I say “I built my house or raised my vegetables myself” to you, my contact is not at that moment with the house or garden, but with you. This is similar in therapy when I tell my dream to you, the therapist. The psychoanalyst interprets the content of the dream. The Gestalt therapist works with the unfolding event of the dream, along with its content, being told to him or her in the present situation. The older dream experience is now embedded in the newer, present experience.

What we have in healthy reflexivity is a structure in which the object of the sentence is the world, then the object is myself in an ongoing cycle. This is the process of making self as continual change and growth. In other words, reflexivity that includes contact is how one's sense of self changes and grows. Both the contact and the reflexivity are necessary for growth.

There is still a further influence of language on the formation of self through understanding language as not merely signification but itself a form of creative action called speech acts. The speech act is a relatively recent development in the philosophy of language that has not yet had much impact on psychology, though it ought to have a great deal.

The usual and conventional way of thinking about language is to treat words as though they only represent or signify things, events, experiences, etc, similar to the way a mathematical equation symbolizes entities in the physical environment. In philosophical terms the string of symbols called sentences are propositions that can be found logically true or false. I can say to you “It is raining,” and you can look outside and see whether that is a true or false proposition. Or if I say that Donald Trump is a Muslim, you could investigate to see if this rather unlikely idea might be true. But a twentieth century British philosopher, John Austin, wrote a book called “How to Do Things with Words, in which he demonstrated the fact that a certain group of verbs just don't fit this description of language as only representing action; they are, in fact, the

actions themselves. For example, if I say “I promise I will pay you back by the end of the month,” This sentence is neither true or false. Even if I don’t pay you back, I did in fact promise. Promising is neither a description or a report nor a proposition. It is not true or false. To say “I promise” is itself the very act of promising.

There are many phrases and forms of speech like this, where the very saying of them is the action itself, not a description or report of the action. For example, “I welcome you” is the act of welcoming. “I congratulate you” is the act of congratulating. The same thing with “I apologize,” “I forgive you,” “I advise you.” In all such sentences you are performing the act itself just by saying it. Austin called these “speech acts.” He also called them “performatives” because they were actually performing or carrying out actions.

There are two things I would like you to notice about these speech acts. The first is that they all begin with the subject “I.” This is the key. They are actions carried out by “I,” and immediately go into the making of self. The minute you change them to a 2nd or 3rd person subject — “you,” “he,” “she,” “they,” it’s no longer a speech act. “She promises to do it,” or “They all congratulated me” are now merely reports and can be found to be logically true or false. Also, if you change the verb tense in the 1st person to a past or future form, the sentence is no longer a speech act. “I did promise you,” or “I will forgive you someday” are also descriptions not acts. So, speech acts happen totally and only in the present.

Secondly speech acts are always addressed to someone. They are directed to a “you,” even if the “you” is only implied as in “I promise” or “I apologize.” You can also direct them toward yourself, as in “I forgive myself” or “I promise myself that I will do better next time.”

So, in speech acts we have the usual sentence structure but with a subject “I,” a verb that is the action itself, and an object that is either “you,” or “myself.” In other words, a speech act, or performative, possesses intentionality and either is an act in itself of making contact or a reflexive act of making a new sense of self in the present moment.

Important philosophers who followed Austin’s lead, such as Paul Ricoeur in France and John Searle in the United States, have done work and written books to show that all spoken language, not just Austin’s special verb phrases, because it is spoken to someone, consists of speech acts. It is beyond my scope here to discuss their work, but it is certainly of interest to us.

I am by no means suggesting that language is the only component that goes into making a growing sense of self. Let me tell you briefly about some collaborative work that Ruella Frank, whom I’m sure some of you know, and I have been doing along these lines. Ruella is the best movement-oriented therapist that I know. For one thing, Ruella has a full-blown developmental perspective, almost unique among Gestalt therapists. Her theory and practice takes us from the infant’s earliest movements, even in utero, then as a neonate in tandem with the parents — and these are movement patterns early in life that she has studied thoroughly and closely — to how the body behaves in movement in making or failing to make contact in adulthood. Secondly, she has developed what I would call, borrowing a term from the linguist and philosopher of language Noam Chomsky, a “deep grammar” of fundamental movements that enable the therapist to diagnose and work with a client’s history and how it either supports or too much haunts their present functioning in making contact.

My own bias is toward language—the good old-fashioned “talking cure,” as one of Freud’s early patients put it. No wonder: I taught literature, including poetry writing, for ten years before I became a psychotherapist. My point is that these two perspectives are not separable, they are not even just complementary. Rather they interpenetrate each other, and this is especially clear when we examine the making of self.

Let me suggest to you that a major difference between psychoanalysis along with many other therapies and Gestalt Therapy is in the clinical attitude toward language. When an analytic patient tells a dream, her sentences describing the dream-event are treated by the therapist as a verbal representation of the dream, which then can be interpreted as a reflection of unconscious processes. The analyst takes over the dream. In a Gestalt Therapy session, although the content of the dream is by no means neglected, but the emphasis falls on the actual present event, which is you, the patient, are now telling me, the therapist, this dream. The telling of the dream is responded to by the therapist as a speech act engaged in making contact between therapist and patient and therefore an experience being made between them in the present situation.

We have learned from Gestalt psychology and Otto Rank as well as from pragmatist philosophers such as John Dewey and George Herbert Mead that all experience is not only made but the very making of it gives it form, rather like a work of art. These are the thinkers who have had very fundamental influence on the theory of Gestalt Therapy, which has taken up an aesthetic view of experience from their influence. The implication is that without form, there is nothing that we can properly call experience.

On the basis of what I have outlined — that directing attention both to the world and oneself as Gestalt formation, reflexivity as the basis for bringing what is made back to oneself, and the elemental subject-verb-object structure as action and not only representation — the fundamental form that becomes the experience called self resembles the structure of language. Jacques Lacan said that the unconscious is structured like a language. I don't have much interest in this unconscious, whether in Freud or Lacan, because I see it as a projection screen upon which the therapist can project a language of symbols and then interpret them. I'm saying that the subject-verb-object structure not only describes the sense of self, but this structure is the actual action that gives it form. Other factors come into play, the body and its movements, imagination, introjection, projection, retrojection, and so on. But underlying the sense of self and its growth is language.



## Michael Vincent Miller

Michael Vincent Miller has practiced and taught Gestalt Therapy for thirty-eight years, currently in New York City. His own training was chiefly with Fritz Perls, Isadore From and the Polsters. After ten years of teaching at Stanford University and M.I.T., he cofounded the Boston Gestalt Institute. He has also trained psychotherapists in Gestalt Therapy in a dozen countries. He was on the editorial board of the "Gestalt Journal" and was Consulting Editor to the "International Gestalt Journal." Besides contributing articles to many journals and magazines, he has written four books: "Intimate Terrorism: The Crisis of Love in an Age of Disillusion" (1996), which has been published in eight languages; "La Poétique de la Gestalt-therapie" (2002), which was published in France; "Teaching a Paranoid to Flirt" (2011), a collection of his writings over thirty years on Gestalt Therapy; and "A Gestalt Therapy Testament" (2014), published in English and Italian in Milan.

Part 2<sup>1</sup>

# Psychotherapy in Postmodern Society

## A Social tool to support human resources of the time

Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb

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### Summary

This chapter, in its totality, takes the reader through a journey in time, introducing the historical-evolutionary line between psychotherapy and society. The author focuses specifically on the contemporary “Postmodern Society”. In Part 1, the chapter presents the beginnings of the psychotherapeutic and science era, a time in which nature was kept away, moving through to the thirties, a context that emphasised subjectivity, the fifties fuelled with power and rebellion, the seventies highlighting the rapid development and triumph of technology together with a release from bonds, to the relational turn in a time of liquidity during the nineties. Part 2, presented here, looks at the world we live in, highlighting the main emerging themes which we are dealing with today including the fear of death and the need for rootedness. Postmodern society brings with it implications for psychotherapy which are discussed at length by considering the figure-ground and the ethics of aesthetics in treatment.

## 7. The Postmodern Society in the Years 2010: the Fear of Death and the Need for Rootedness

The contemporary social life is marked by two strong and distressing experiences: “door to door” terrorism and migration flows. The first one gives a sense of powerlessness and existential distress: none of us has the certainty of returning home alive when we get out. The chance of dying entered the sphere of daily work (such as the massacre of Charlie Hebdo in Paris in January 2015) or that of free time (such as the Bataclan massacre of November 2015 in Paris). The enemy does not have a clear identity: it can be a nice boy next door or an anonymous customer in a supermarket. A recent research in primary schools has shown that eight out of ten children are afraid of dying or that their parents could die while they are at

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<sup>1</sup> This paper presents *Part 2* of the full chapter written by the author. *Part 1* may be found in Volume 1: Issue 1

school. What kind of therapy can we provide to cure this anxiety that seizes by surprise a generation that grew up in the comfort of the economic boom or – even worse - in the loneliness of play station? The only antidote, I think, is the concreteness of relationship, to find the anchor in love for the significant other, and the humility to recognize our limits, to give up grandiose omnipotence to which the narcissistic culture has accustomed us.

On the other hand, the *migration flows* make us feel uncertain and ambivalent: how much should we open the doors to foreigners? The sense of uncertainty that is in the DNA of the postmodern society is embodied in the fear of losing home, work, land, other things: goods already precarious. Both of these traumatic experiences of our time (terrorism and migration) are an attack on our anaesthesia, a provocation to our inability to meet the neighbour or to help our children to give sense to their lives.

Today we are witnessing the need, which comes from different sides, to rediscover the strength of social life. Philosopher Ferraris declares the end of post-modernism with the advent of neo-realism, which could be defined as a way of communication that adheres to the facts, perhaps scarcely creative and not very emotional, but “secure”. Today we must admit that - despite the fact that creative identification remains a universally recognized value for the healthy development of both the individual and the relationship - the goal of therapy in contemporary society can no longer be interchange or identification, but on the contrary it should be the sense of belonging, rootedness, the deep sense of being-with. If in the seventies the problem of the Western society was the denial of aggression, today it is *the denial of the need for rootedness*.

I am referring to the derogation, almost an annihilation of the vital importance, that our government expresses towards the needs of young people to get a job, towards the need for housing of immigrants and the need for constituent affection of children, who often suffer the lack of physical or relational presence of their parents (who are away from home, or distracted, or anxious), regardless of conditions of separation or family reunification (which also contribute to changing significantly the anthropology of family relationships). I do not think that we realize quite enough (or that we are helped to do so) to what extent, from the moment they were born, children live an emotional abandonment and confusion about the emotional points of reference, of how rare is a 24-hour physical closeness between parents and children, that once was considered “normal” at least until the first year of age.

Today children grow up adapting themselves to the lack of caregivers, developing anxiety towards the containment of their own emotions and a habit not to share them (the other is not present, or is always busy, or he may be a malicious paedophile).

This condition does not improve over the years, on the contrary the society becomes more and more demanding and false heartedly caring. Compulsory education requires capacity of concentration and dedication to studying, enrolment at universities is a kind of lottery, a job, if you find one, requires significant sacrifices and gives few guarantees. Emotional relationships, in these stressful conditions, are not always a relaxing option or a shelter in which to rest and sleep (rather than exercise its relational creativity).

The experiential knowledge of young people today has to do with those who must navigate very quickly in a complex world, in which educators - parents and teachers - know less than the students: we are referring here to the world of the Internet, and working relationships that are based on values very different from those of 20 years ago.

Young people must move without a clear sense of where they are going, of equilibrium that exists between them and the environment, and must do so quickly: the videogame goes on incessantly and will not wait. They learn how to cope with this emergency through trial and error and they cannot waste time between the

games. Sometimes they do not even know if they have won or lost the “games” that they are playing. They cannot relax, there is no orientation phase in their lives: too many emergencies, too little time and no adult who knows better than them.

What lacks in family relationships today is a possibility to build a sense of safety net for its members, the sense of presence, knowing that the other “is at home”, even if in a manipulative and aggressive way, but still present. In other words, if years ago *family psychotherapy had to be centred on support to separate from inhibiting relationships, today it should be focused on building relationships so far inexistent.*

Today's families bear a different kind of discomfort: children who fall victims to drugs and other substances that actually create dependence; eating disorders whose clinical manifestations are more and more articulated in a universe of symptoms in which the contact with the naturalness of the body is lost; anxiety and sense of alienation from the self (or depression), a dramatic manifestation of deep loneliness that comes from the lack of relationship rather than from the need to be different. This is the new reality of family relationships, and each approach has to deal with the need for change in related clinical practice. Treating a family with serious dependency disorders as if it were a family that does not allow children's liberation is a clinical error that we cannot afford.

However, young drug addicts today, even earlier than the incapacity to attain autonomy from their family, suffer from bodily desensitization, which protects them from the anxiety generated by the lack of relational containment. The use of toxic substances is not needed, as in the seventies, to feel capable of autonomy but to feel one's own body, to feel alive (although such use ends tragically with anesthetizing or death). The clinic of families with addiction problems - or any other epidemiological problem of youth disorders - should therefore be addressed to the discovery of the self-in-contact between members, starting from the feelings of the body and the emotions aroused by the presence of other family members.

Body awareness, emotional containment and full presence at the contact boundary with the other, with necessary modifications to be made in individual clinical cases, may be a new paradigm of family therapy, as opposed to the paradigm of independence and liberation that characterized the birth of the family movement, and which was shared by the humanistic movement.

Today, in the liquid society of uncertainty, the adults, descendants of narcissistic society, accustomed to solitude that allowed them to emerge as individuals from inhibiting relations are challenged to re-immers themselves in the relationship with their children, threatening the sense of failure of their own self ( “I'm an incapable parent”). Only this concrete presence can give them the containment of a real contact, the sense of “home”, no matter if they meet the requirements of an ideal self that does nothing but take them away from the concreteness of the senses.

## **8. Psychotherapy in Postmodern Society: from Support of the Figure to Support of the Ground**

The psychotherapy clinical work evolved starting from supporting the autonomy which implies the sense of self, through supporting the “feeling to feel” (Damasio, 1994; 1999), to supporting the “embodied simulation” (Gallese, 2007; Welsh, Spagnuolo Lobb, 2012) as a process of intentionality shared during the therapeutic session. This deep and procedural recognition allows the patient to feel rooted in the relation. From the clinical point of view, we must focus our attention on the feelings of the therapist and the patient at their contact boundary, on being “the self” in the here-and-now of the encounter: “How do you feel with me right now?” Not only from the mental point of view, but “how do you breathe?”, “what are you looking

at?" what is your posture, muscle tone, physical excitement when you are in contact with me? The mission of psychotherapy today is to create a sense of belonging in a relationship where you feel recognized, to revitalize the contact boundary with the other (to feel the body), to give sense to implicit intentionality of the contact, to provide tools for horizontal support.

What is missing in our society is the ability to stay in the relationship starting from the *containment of the initial chaos*, which would allow individuals to experience that sense of granted security that comes from the "obvious" presence of the significant other and from which can emerge differentiation of the self. What is missing is the relational ground on which the experience of novelty can rest upon. It is necessary to support the experience of "aggressive" emotion (from Latin *ad-gredere*) with a relational ground, so that it can lead to a contact with the other rather than to its indiscriminate destruction. Without the sense of solidity of the ground, the figure cannot be formed clearly.

Today we have lost the ability to live *the conflict*, which is essential for the vitality and growth of any society. In order to feel the conflict, it is necessary to experience the power that comes from the feeling (physiological and psychological) of being rooted to the ground, and from a sense of harmonious and spontaneous self. An example would be to ensure that primary school children start their day with a body relaxation exercise, rather than with a task to which they immediately react with distraction and hyperactivity. This basic experience would allow children to stay in class with a more confined sense of self. Another example in the labour market could be starting the day at the factory with *briefing* time, where those who want can tell the group of colleagues with what body sensation and relational emotion starts their day. And so on: all of socialization and employment agencies should take into account this need for relational rootedness.

The therapeutic relationship, like any other relationship, has to cope with this sense of emergency containing the chaos that characterizes the beginning of each experience. In addition, it must be based on procedural and aesthetic aspects, defined elsewhere as implicit narrative aspects (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2006; Stern, 2006) able to build the *ground* of acquired certainties from which the figure can then emerge clearly differentiated and with relational strength, with the charm that characterizes the harmony of the opposites in the figure / ground dynamic. Without the sense of solidity that comes from the earth, from the ground, we cannot orient ourselves in relationships - especially in difficult ones - with clarity, and with confidence that the acceptance of the different has its own demands.

The clinical problem is no longer to support the independence in the contact, but to support the relationship so that the feeling of self can find a solid relational containment to get oriented in the contact. Therefore therapeutic relationship must provide not so much courage to break preconceived authoritarian rules as the sense of security in the relationship and in the other, which allows a clear perception / differentiation of the figure and a clear ability to act as a conscious co-creation sustained by curiosity towards the other.

For example, in families, parents should be helped to see the relational physiological processes of their children (how they breathe while doing homework) and not to fall into temptation of the battle between the Egos (who is right). Groups must support the harmonic self-regulating process which results from horizontal relationships. The successful completion of the postmodern process implies capturing this need that underlies the neo-realistic appeal: to make evident and support concrete certainties on which to draw, rather than claiming the Ego's capacity to create solutions that would otherwise remain ideals. We could say that the Gestalt neo-realism is to grasp the now-for-next from being-there in the contact. It is the parent who supports the breathing of the child while doing homework, the intentionality that - once recognized by the other - allows you to feel at home in the world.

## 9. The Ethics of Aesthetics as a Treatment Trend in Postmodern Society

The relational milestone that crossed all the psychotherapeutic approaches from the 1980s onwards was supported by scientific researches that marked our century: firstly, the discovery of mirror neurons (Gallese et al., 1996), and then the definition of bodily processes as the forefront of the training of the mind and of the self (Damasio, 1994; 1999). These two scientific evidences (the intentional resonance in contact with the environment and location of the experience of the self in the sensory body) oriented all the psychotherapy towards new trends.

First of all, we are referring to concrete relationship, the bodily one, not the one represented internally. The focus of treatment and understanding of mental distress has been moved to the contact boundary, to what is happening here and now in the concrete encounter, bodily and sensory. The interest of all approaches, even of those traditionally intrapsychic, has shifted on to the “between”.

Today the approaches based on theories of the relationship are rediscovering these aspects with a different emphasis. The therapist is trained in techniques that include bodily processes (breathing, posture, muscle tension and mutual synchronization between therapist and patient). The spread of EMDR and other techniques of neuro-postural approach to trauma express clearly the need to provide our patients with relational rootedness that passes through bodily synchronizations. The concept of diagnosis has become more flexible and contextualized. Even the DSM-5 looks upon the diagnostic data, which were previously considered as stable and stabilizing the therapeutic relationship, as temporary, as something that should be contextualized in other aspects of the individual and of the situation in which s/he is inserted.

The challenge that psychotherapy experiences trying to give support to the possible resources in an uncertain and liquid society, desensitized in the body, globalized, virtual, pushes it beyond some social aspects, such as the dichotomous thinking that separates the good from the evil, the healthy from the ill, the body from the mind, and even the self from the world. A possible support for a teenager who pines about his sexual identity, feeling attracted (not fully among other) to both males and females, is not to decide an orientation (which would not fully resonate in his body), but to feel one's own body when the breathing is relaxed, to identify oneself with the feeling of the body even if unexpected, and to feel recognized in this existence by the therapist.

The ethics of aesthetics solves the dilemma between the Freudian individual's needs and the needs of society (Spagnuolo Lobb et al., 2001). It is opening an international psychotherapeutic debate as an epistemological possibility adequate to the anxiety of our days, since it brings out the values of the self-regulation of the relationship. A boy realizes that he does not want his mother, not as a reaction to the sense of guilt, or through denial, but when, in the full presence of the senses, he sees that the mother wants the father (or another man), not him. He realizes that the mother is tender with him, that she feels proud of him, but that she does not have sexual desire towards him. The ethics of the aesthetic guarantees the fullness of presence with each other: there is nothing that should be avoided.

On the contrary, it is exactly the avoidance of clear perception at the contact boundary that leads to the lack of ethics. Embodied empathy leads to self-regulation of the contact as it gives support to intentionality of the contact that moves the behaviour of human beings, even the most aggressive ones. For this reason the ethics of aesthetics resolves the split left by the Freudian theory of individual and social needs and entrusts the embodied empathy and the senses with the control of human relations: an opposite perspective to the Freudian. If we see the split, we need a superego. If we consider that there is harmony in everything, we need to be more in touch with our senses. Actually we should seize the *now-for-next* of the

patient in contact with us: we start from the pain, from the harmony that inhabits it and from the intentionality of the contact that was mortified. We look at the pain as it emerges from the experience at the contact boundary, with grace, vitality and orientation.

## 10. A Clinical Example: a Mother's Issue

I chose this example to describe a new concept of psychotherapy's depth: this is a look on the physiology-in-relationships of today's families. There creeps the danger of an agonizing loneliness that characterizes the experience of young people and which leads to clinical manifestations mentioned earlier.

A mother came to talk to me concerned about the behaviour of her second child, an eleven-year-old girl. The lady is unemployed, her husband (father of the girl) has a plumbing services company and spends most of the time at work, as it represents the only source of family income. He chose a marginal role at home, entrusting the task of educating their children to the wife, who does not complain about that during our encounter. The first child is a 15 year old male, quiet, passionately dedicated to the computer. The little girl has always been a bit restless and often expresses discontent in various ways: a difficult character that cannot bear to be limited. Her mother used to please her always, she never gets angry, and she explains everything in a calm manner. The mother reacts to the difficulties of her daughter with a kind of Pollyanna complex: she supports and appreciates her intelligence anyway. It happens that the girl often suffers from headaches. According to the medical examinations, it is not anything organic. This pushes the mother to consult a psychotherapist. She says that the girl is often nervous, she accuses the parents for various reasons, sometimes even strange, such as not letting her travel with the whole family. In short, according to the mother, it seems that any excuse to criticize is good.

The headache appears in times requiring effort (homework). The girl says she does not want to study, but the way she says it looks like she implies a question to the mother: "Do you want / think I can bring myself to study?" It is the mother herself to tell me about this feeling and yet she does not know how to tell her daughter "yes." This elusiveness of the other is perceived both by the child and the mother, on the basis of an apparently very positive relationship, this is a typical situation of family relationships today: an impalpable absence of the other. I ask the mother: "What difficulties do you have to accept that your daughter might fail in doing her homework?" She responds immediately: "None. There is nothing wrong about my daughter." I tell her: "I ask you to pay attention to the sensations of your body before answering. When you see that your daughter cannot bring herself to do homework, what do you feel deep inside? Let the answer emerge from the sensations of your body." The mother reflects, breathes in, and then replies: "I feel deeply anxious. I wonder what I was not able to give her. Why does she fail? And what can I do myself if she fails? Then I get overwhelmed by distress. Now I understand that in my relationship with her I deny my distress and I see 'blindly' only her intelligence, which at that moment is completely useless. I do this so as not to feel her discomfort which I could not handle." I take advantage of this moment of opening up of the mother to me and I continue: "And what do you think that your daughter feels when you - denying your anxiety - tell her that with her intelligence she is definitely going to make it?" The mother continues: "My daughter does not feel accepted in her discomfort, she understands that my anxiety makes me blind and therefore she protects me, she does not say anything, she closes in front of me. I think that at that point she bursts with her anxiety and the inability to tell it to someone, and so comes the headache."

I always get emotional when a parent is aware of being loved by his child perhaps more than he is able to love him. I believe that is the moment in which the universe is revealed to the person: despite the sincere commitment and creative effort that all of us put in being-with, the key to building an active and responsible society is to realize that it is not all there, that the other loves us more than we think, and it makes our Ego surrender to a higher beauty. Regaining this sense of reliable alterity, the possibility of entrusting the

others with what we cannot do, is in my opinion the fundamental ethical value of any therapeutic intervention. Going back to the mother's issue, I say: "It is a difficult time for your daughter; at the age of eleven she has many new sensations and many commitments.

The habit of being always pleased makes her refuse to do her homework when she finds it difficult, that is, avoid the risk of being humiliated by not being able to make it. She herself said that her daughter sometimes says: "I don't want to be humiliated in front of the class." Apart from the fear of failure, there is a desire within your daughter, which is normal for her growth: that the headache does not block her, that she can normally engage in doing her tasks despite the limits of headaches, that she can feel able to overcome what previously seemed impossible, and that she can therefore be defined as a smart girl in the society. This will be possible only if your daughter could confide in someone her fear of failure, without feeling guilty or judged. For your daughter, feeling that you are worried about her becomes a bond that does not allow her to grow. It would be magical for your daughter to feel recognized in the concrete efforts that you are putting to be there for her, it would be relaxing if someone told her: I see that you are very determined not to give up and to keep going: when you are afraid of not being able to do something, the headache will help you not to fail."

This idea convinces the mother: it seems to her as a good solution not to superficially neglect the discomfort of her daughter, and at the same time not to let her get stuck in the mud with an understanding attitude. The intentionality of the girl is to grow, and to "grow" means to succeed despite the fear, despite the headaches that she actually feels, but she cannot help the fear that they entail. In this case the help that the mother can offer to the daughter is to balance a positive attitude - that alone would contribute to supporting the narcissistic style (an appeal to the ideal self "you are smart and you can do it") which is dangerous because it does nothing but maintain a sense of fragility of the girl and makes impossible the revelation of the real self - with concrete recognition of social self-regulation processes and intentionality to be valuable for society.

A similar "revelation" at the contact boundary between mother and daughter has to pass now through the sensitivity of the body, through the mother's ability to find out in her own body the sense of anxiety of not being a good mother when she sees her daughter discouraged, and on the other side to perceive in the body of the daughter (in her breathing, posture, the way she breathes when she looks at her, etc.) the desire to succeed and to be recognized in this by her mother. In the context of bodily desensitization in which the primary intimate relationships are being developed today, this is the "truth" that has to be reached in the relationship between parents and children: a co-presence, first of all sensory, that Merleau-Ponty (1979) has rightly called *intercorporeity*. The co-creation of the therapeutic experience is motivated - supported and directed - by an intentionality which for the Gestalt approach is always an intentionality of contact with the other (I call it *now-for-next*).

The patient's feeling is mirrored in his aspiration towards the significant other in the here-and-now and the therapist's feeling is used as a "world-of-life" of the patient, as a spontaneous environment that reacts to the patient and is in turn acted by him / her, except that, unlike the patient, the therapist has a map to read the contact that takes place in the here-and-now of the therapeutic encounter. The contact line between therapist and patient is the place of the therapy and the patient tends to be spontaneous with the therapist more than he was in previous significant relationships. Today the therapy consists in the relational recognition of the blocked intentionality of contact, which can be unfolded with the therapist.

In the current scientific fervour for relationship, the neuroscientific researches which with increasing emphasis confirm the relational nature of our brain<sup>2</sup>, and the latest reflections of Daniel Stern (2010) who sees the unit of measurement of consciousness in the perception of moving shapes, confirm the trend of contemporary psychotherapy. According to this trend, the primary reality is the presence co-created at the contact boundary, the *gestalt* emerging from the encounter of the contact intentionalities.

## 11. Conclusions: the Ethics of a Hermeneutic Approach to Training and Clinic

Various psychotherapeutic approaches are deeply linked to the society in which they were born as well as to the emerging social needs. Therefore it is important to start from the hermeneutics of each approach in order to use it appropriately. One should bathe in the sea of the chosen approach, going all the way to the bottom, fully identifying oneself with it, in order to learn its language systematically. It is like knowing how to read music in order to play it. Only when the language has been assimilated so much that you deeply understand its meaning, is it possible both to communicate with colleagues who use other languages, and to make it evolve with the evolution of society, opening yourself to listening to and understanding different music, played by other approaches.

It seems to me that this is the first necessary act of honesty and fairness towards those who mastered the art of psychotherapy. Psychotherapy students do not have to learn fundamentalism, but the ability to work within the limits, first of all their own limits and then those of the model, as well as within the limits of the situation.

At this point, regardless of the approach, a psychotherapist has a social and political mission as he helps the individuals to regain an inspired vitality and different faiths, while getting themselves rooted in their significant and constitutive relations and overcoming the current impasse made of fear of death and emptiness of values.

A psychotherapist cannot regard himself as a private operator (Lichtenberg, 2009): his work is also political and his efforts in groups are the most effective support he could give to the actors that move the social welfare gear.

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<sup>2</sup> The latest studies of Gallese (2007) specify how the ability to perceive the other by intuition (attributed to mirror neurons) is linked to the perception of intentional movements: the mirror neurons are activated in front of an intentional movement of the other, not in front of a repetitive motion.

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## Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb

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# The nature of change

Lidija Pecotić

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## Abstract

The theme of this Congress has inspired an emergence of a number of questions and search for possible answers. For example: Does change generally exist or not? Can science explain consciousness and awareness upon which the majority of the theories of change in psychotherapy are based? What is the nature of change in psychotherapy? If it exists, what is changed? How does it change? What remains? What are the elements of change? Why is change difficult? What stabilizes change? In our lecture we will try to discuss some of the possible answers including topics such as figure and ground, fixed gestalt, awareness, Paradoxical theory of change, insight and neuropsychological research.

## Key Words

figure, ground, fixed gestalt, awareness, insight, change.

“We are subtly invited and led to believe that the fundamental reality is far from our ability of experience, intuition and even imagination” (Tallis, 2017). Parmenides, one of the most important pre-Socratic philosophers, denied the reality of change and spoke about the changeless universe, unique and timeless. While sometime later, for Heraclitus, everything consists of change. Parmenides' thought had a strong influence on Plato, who also believed that reality consisted of unchangeable forms and universal ideas that fit all individual things and concepts. Two thousand years later, Descartes and Spinoza also express their conviction that under the visible changes on the surface there is eternal stability, and that on the most fundamental level, there is no change. Their thought influenced the development of science in the later centuries. For the Parmenidian way of understanding reality, "becoming", in fact, is not possible. (Tallis, 2017).

A significant influence on the understanding of existence and non-existence of fundamental reality comes also from religions according to which what actually is real is – the unchanging, hidden deity which

manifests itself from time to time in its own creation (Tallis, 2017). These and similar topics require more attention and we will have the opportunity to hear about them at this Congress, from Prof. Ivan Koprek, Rene Camilleri, Aleksandar Djakovac, Edin Urjan Kukavica and others.

From the point of view of the idea that the fundamental reality is unchangeable and that the ideas of Parmenides and general relativity are both possible, the picture of the world of those who in its understanding include: consciousness and awareness, the individual starting points, the subjects and the changes they observe through the constant flow of the present and experience, seems to be naive. However, the opposite point of view, as always, exists and reads: the change is undoubtedly real and life, people and worlds they create and destroy have their own history. After Parmenides had reached its peak through the theory of general relativity, Heraclitus had his moment to consider the nature of change. Quantum mechanics raised the question and provoked the belief of a definite reality that is independent of the flow of experience.

For us in psychotherapy, these considerations are important as the background on which our topic of change develops. One possibility is to conclude that both Parmenides and Heraclites have each touched a part of the truth, one aspect of the stability/change continuum, therefore change is realistic as well as stability. In fact, change and stability are in the relationship of the figure and ground where the figure is most often the one which changes in relation to its stable basis, as the clouds are constantly changing in the unchangeable sky.

At this point it is inevitable to mention well-known concepts: figure/background/ground, used by the theory of Gestalt Therapy, and through which we continue our discussion on change from the perspective of Gestalt Therapy. The figure is a focus of interest which changes. The changing focus of an individual's interest or a figure has its background, its context which also changes, and with which the figure is in a dynamic relationship. An important characteristic of the relationship between the figure and the background is the tendency towards completing this relationship through the identification of a figure that brings satisfaction and meaning.

An unchangeable foundation or ground, on the other hand, does not tend and does not stimulate the movement towards closure and completing. The foundation is regarded as infinite and without shape, but conceive and provides "a context that allows the depth of perception of the figure, giving it a perspective without imposing an independent interest" (Polster & Polster 1973). The whole life is the basis for the present moment, say the Polsters, and the Field theory, as a way of looking at reality and the man in it, enables us to see that ground as widely and deeply as it allows the viewer's view. According to Ludwig Frombach (Frombach, 2003) for Fritz Perls and Gestalt theory, the ground is a fertile void or "place of creative indifference." The differentiation of the figures and backgrounds has its own non-differentiation in its ground. The ground (as Frombach says) "cannot be falsely equated with the background". The background is diffused in relation to the figure, while the ground is indifferent and undifferentiated. From this standpoint, one of the goals of Gestalt Therapy is to integrate those differentiated rigid dualities into flexible polarities (Stivens, 2010).

The process of forming figures in a given context and its possibilities is characterized by attention, concentration, interest, excitement, flexibility and aesthetics of the movement. (Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, 1994). The meaningful completion of this process of formation and destruction of the figure is a part of the creative adjustment of a person in his/her growth through the lasting co-creation with the environment. This relationship is not always adequate, therefore the ideal characteristics of this process are lost and make place to the habitual schemes of the relationship between the individual and the environment. The individual selectively and repetitively pays attention to those aspects of the interpersonal field which relate to its deepest unfinished experiences, desires and fears. Gestalt Therapy offers ways to notice, observe, get to know and respect these schemes. Using the Gestalt Therapy criteria for what

is "functional", we can say that the way in which an individual organizes his/her interpersonal field at any given moment, is as much functional as it is not based on the absence of presence at the contact boundary through unconscious, automatic and repetitive: confluence, projection, introjection and retroreflection. The assumption is that unfinished situations underlie fixed interpersonal gestalt (Greenberg, 1999) and that the individual constantly organizes his/her interpersonal field in a way that can offer the simplest possible chance to complete the original unfinished situation. This nature of the scheme of experience disrupts the ability of the organism to be fully present at the contact boundary with others and to have access to what s/he is and what others are, especially because of the ambivalent need to finish situation i.e. to retain the previous state.

The next question relates to how this fixed, repetitive and habitual form of organization of the individual's experience in his/her environment affects the quality and the way of presence at the contact boundary? Is, among other things, the absence of presence, as well as the way in which the individual is absent at the boundary with others, the focus of our attention in the therapeutic relationship? If the answer is yes, what happens in the therapy at such boundary? Is this absence of presence the co-created dysfunction that we want to know, recognize, respect and overcome? How do we achieve this? Is it a change in therapy? If so, is change stable or not?

In the search for answers to these questions, we referred to the recent neuropsychological research (Ginot, 2015) of the unconscious, automatic and habitual schemes of the individual's creative adjustment. These processes are complex and consist of emotional memory, the memory of interpersonal experiences, interpretation of events, associative learning and many conclusions about one's own identity and values that are united in a fixed map of experiences which the individual is not aware of, but which habitually organize the relational field of experience. In essence, in developmental terms, an interpersonal, habitual, repetitive, unconscious organization of the relational field reflects the child's attempt to give meaning to what is happening inside of him and around him, in his environment. A child does not have the capacity to see parents with the necessary clarity and wideness, which includes seeing through all the fields to which the parent belongs nor he has ability to have a perspective based on reality. Part of the child is in confluence with the parent, i.e. with his/her state and organization of the self (Beaumont, 1993) with which the child identifies and imitates. As a result, the feelings such as shame or humiliation which a child experiences, will be observed by the child as if they originate and emerge from him, and not as a result of parental verbal humiliation or other threats. This is often seen in clients when in the state of crisis or trauma their regulatory adaptive mechanisms decompensate and they return to very negative narratives about themselves and their own value. We will have the opportunity to hear about these topics from our lecturers Prof. Dubravka Kocijan Hercigonja, Mikela Smith La Rosa, Mirela Badurina and others.

These schemes are very strong and powerful. Why? Why is it so difficult to establish flexibility and creative adjustment through contact, how and in what do we believe in Gestalt Therapy? What is the value of these fixed forms of behavior for the individual, which is reflected in their resistance? We do not mean, of course, the social, romantic and confluent aspects of human contact, but we are talking about a complex phenomenon that will be discussed more in today's plenary session by Prof. Michael Vincent Miller.

So, one of the possible answers lies, according to the contemporary neuropsychology researchers (Ginot, 2015) in the evolutionary experience of human being who is under pressure to constantly adjust creatively, and in the ways in which these requirements shape the way our brain, mind and body work. One of the thesis by which neuroscientists interpret this fact is that the speed of an organism's response to the environment was very important for the development and preservation of mankind. In Gestalt psychology, a long-standing phenomenon is expressed through the *Pragnanz* law according to which the simplest organization of experience is the one that seeks the least cognitive effort, the one that will appear as a figure and be the choice in creating answers and meanings we give to experience; that is, the one which is fast

and eliminates the unknown, redundant, tiresome and complicated. Therefore, we often eliminate a lot of new data of experience and then based on that, we create meanings (Stevenson, 2014). As a result, brain/mind/body developed a tendency to automatically select and act already known and habitual schemes of organizing the elements of experience. A person, who manifests such rigid schemes is most likely guided by fixed ways in which s/he organizes the elements of his/her interpersonal field, and interprets reality in accordance with what s/he already knows. In this way, a person does not learn from reality and does not take into consideration, different or new elements of experience. Destructing the rigid way of seeing the world, understanding it and being aware of it, is certainly one of the significant therapeutic goals, along with giving support to the process of flexible creative adjustment in the ever-changing field circumstances. How to achieve all of this in therapy?

If we define the change as the realization of the ability to modify the ways in which automatically and unconsciously the elements of the field of experience are organized, to regulate the affects, as well as to recall and confront distorted narratives about us and others, therapy is definitely one of the human efforts to achieve this (Gynot, 2015). Almost all forms of therapy see change as their goal. The current understanding of the brain/mind indicates that what supports change in a person is the ability to be engaged and committed *to the process of active reflective awareness* (Gynot, 2015), *i.e. reflecting simultaneously and at the time in which the event takes place, where the ego-function manifests its capacity to (instead in egotism) rise above experience of contact in which the self is involved, without reducing the capacity to adequately experiences a contact in the given situation.* Gestalt Therapy has formulated a method of concentration during the co-creation of experience. Post factum reflections, as well as those before the beginning of the experience, enriched by experiences where activity and reflection occur at the same time as the individual/world encounter in the gestalt sense of the word, contribute to change. The more the client is aware of emotional, cognitive and interpersonal schemes, the more his/her psychological and behavioral flexibility grows. This active engagement within reflective awareness should take place in both sessions and in life. Supporting and encouraging the client at the time of the real event to reflect at the moment when some irregularity appears, helps therapeutic change. *This is a difficult process because it demands that we must necessarily experience our feelings, negative aspects and tendencies of the self and that at the same time we do not react to them in the usual way, but to find or apply a new way of passing through the experience.*

The nature of the therapeutic insights is much more complex than gaining the understanding of the past, psychological dynamics, and fixed interpersonal gestalt schemes. The question still remains – does insight have the power to make a sustainable change? One specific view on the topic of consciousness and awareness will be presented to us by Prof. Velimir Abramovic, and we will continue to consider the question of whether it is the conscious insight what brings change and a better creative adjustment? Therapists are witnesses that most clients reach relatively significant understanding relatively quickly. However, many clients often say that strong and significant content is lost very fast, in a day or two after a therapeutic session. This type of forgetting, according to the neuropsychological research we rely on in this paper (Gynot, 2015) is based on unconscious processes that may appear as resistances but are also essentially based on the tendency of the brain/mind/body, we mentioned at the very beginning, to return to those state of functioning that can be easily and automatically established and that are stronger than new experiences, most often by the intensity of emotions associated with them. Efforts which the organism invests to carry out an aware reflection on what happened in a therapy lose their energy and efficiency quickly. Automatic and habitual ways of being in experience, behaving and acting in a familiar way are quickly re-established requiring much less brain/mind/body effort. Slower and deliberate efforts concerning the processes of awareness often have to fight for survival.

In order to establish a new way of organizing the elements of experience in the field, in addition to the reflective awareness that consolidates the affective states, it is necessary that emotional experience also

reverses its influence to the cognitive aspects, expanding the nature of insight. Perls, in addition, stresses that awareness, although it is integrative and represents an explicit goal of therapy, is not sufficient for the client without repeating new experiences, both in a therapeutic relationship and outside. In the same way, the stabilization of new experiences gained in therapy is contributed by: the therapeutic relationship which includes both the I-Thou and the I-It aspects; the time necessary for the insight to embody, materialize and integrate into the support system, through the functional physiology and assimilated experiences (Perls, 1992); change of the client's narrative, which is related to new identities, values and skills of the client as well as non-specific factors of the therapeutic process. If therefore, the therapeutic experience is not accompanied by repeated efforts (Gynot 2015) to keep what is discovered and to further experience and reflect on this ("*what once was*") at the moment of event in "*the here-and-now and what follows*", their effectiveness is lost. Rather, we could say that such, let's say an ethical process, reflecting in real time when the action is happening is not aimed at repressing or erasing the emotions, disturbing thoughts or actively turning away from a fixed interpersonal gestalt, but this reflecting an emotional/cognitive/physical state enables constant experiencing in all its fullness, and automatically satisfies the requirements of what will soon be discussed – the 'Paradoxical Theory of Change'. What helps a client in and outside a therapy is rooted in the client's ability to fully experience the state in which the basis was outside the awareness process, but also in an attempt to simultaneously reorganize that experience and scheme. Resistance to these processes can be found in the client's history, although the problem gets more complicated when it is known that the sources of these hold-ups are also found in the transgenerational transmission of unfinished business and the transgenerational transmission of the way of organizing the experience (Baim, 2007). New ways of creative adjustment seem as if they need to deserve the right to belong to the individual and its system of leadership, which is most often happening when one recognizes what is or what is found (Beaumont, 2014). To those who work with human systems, family, organizations, this well-known law, which will be discussed later in the workshops of Keti Peric and James Aston, Radmila Zivanovic, Ivana Marinschek, Emilija Stoimenova Canevska, Ivana Vidakovic, Snezana Opacic, has been effectively applied in the Paradoxical Theory of Change by Arnold Beisser (Beisser, 1970).

These rigid schemes, which can be connected with the habit, also trigger the question of free will. Although we are strongly influenced by them, reflexive awareness nevertheless fosters and leads to free will, which frees us from the role of prisoners of old schemes, beliefs and old narratives.

Perls did not explicitly describe in detail the theory of change, but it was implicitly presented in his work and applied in the techniques of the gestalt. Arnold Beisser (1970) called it the "Paradoxical Theory of Change" and in short, it consists of the standpoint that "a change occurs when one becomes what it is, not when one tries to become what it is not."

This attitude opens, among other things, another topic, the subject of authenticity. It is not a secret to an individual but is often risky and painful (Just, 2002). Authenticity is the individual's uniqueness, the discovery of oneself, stepping out of anonymity. It is the conformity between the inner and the outer, that is – to become fragile at the contact boundary, feeling both one's own and existential shame and fear. It means: to risk success and defeat, security and insecurity, acceptance and rejection. Authenticity, as informed spontaneity, is the beginning of change, which does not happen through a forced effort of an individual or another person to change, but it is indicated when we become aware of and remain what we are in the context in which we are, while at the same time maintaining an intimate relationship with others. The end of most efforts to see and understand life is found in this paradox. The Gestalt therapist is not an agent of change. His/her strategy is to encourage and frustrate the client to stay in what, how and where he already is. "Acknowledge what is" (Beaumont, 2014) explicitly and articulated, who we are, where our place is, where we belong, how we give and receive, represent the source of vitality and joy. The frame of dialogue in which Gestalt Therapy occurs and its relational character invite both the client and the therapist to be with

their current experience, focused on what is in them and what is in the related field which is forming. Change, if it is recognized and created, is a phenomenon in which both participants are found. Consequences of changes make the petrified forms and patterns by which the elements of relational fields are transformed into the processes of creative and vibrant exchanges. *The ultimate solution is reached when everyone in the contact can be who they are, while maintaining an intimate relationship with one another. The therapist is also starting to change because s/he is also expected to be someone who s/he is, with another person. This interaction leads to opportunities where the therapist is most effective when s/he is changing the most because when s/he is open to change s/he will probably have the most impact on his/her client.*

The relevance of this theory, in present time, in a society that develops at a rapid rate, which is difficult to psychologically follow and legally regulate, remains in the fact that one must strengthen his ability to evaluate where s/he is in relation to such variability and to find his/her own stable basis. A man must do this through the approaches and choices which allow him to move dynamically and flexibly through time and field while keeping with him/her the precise center which guides him/her. In psychotherapy, and especially in Gestalt Therapy, there is intimidation with the concept of "should". But "shoulds" are very important and necessary for people, provided they do not create horror stories (from an interview with Erving Polster). It is increasingly difficult for a man to find an anchor in ideologies that become inappropriate. He has to find new ways. One of those paths is contained in the wisdom of the Gestalt paradoxical theory of change and its attitude about change where the goal is not so much that it develops a good, fixed character of a person, but his/her awareness and the ability to move with time and co-create adjustment to the environment, while at the same time maintaining the stability of his/her support system.

We have seen that consciousness and awareness are often mentioned elements of change. Can science explain consciousness and awareness on which most theories of change in psychotherapy are based? Galileo Galilei has laid the foundations of modern science, especially mechanics and physics in the scientific revolution. Galileo separated the matter from sensory quality, making mathematical physics possible, and declaring that mathematics is a language of natural science that can not include the sensory aspect of the matter. Of course, Galileo did not deny the existence of sensory qualities. He moved them into the soul (Goff, 2017), the sphere and experience between mind and body, the reflection that turns events into experiences, elusive in words, another phenomenon which, except in the name of our profession, is rarely directly mentioned in psychotherapeutic literature. Why? Is there room in the contemporary general outcry about the rights of the disempowered to return the *soul* its place among us as well, in order to avoid, as with everything which is rejected and unmentioned, to reach us in the deadlocks of our thoughts, with unanswered questions and unreached truths? Galileo, therefore, initiated the natural science by separating consciousness and awareness outside the domain of matter and the physical world. This is not an argument that there will never be a physical explanation of consciousness and awareness, but the materialism that rests on this separation cannot, therefore, be an adequate basis for understanding consciousness and awareness. It is time to examine the possibilities that, of course, do not exclude contemporary science, which according to Prof. Velimir Abramovic becomes "one contradictory system". This new attitude expands the existing concept of science which was historically limited by insisting on the materialistic paradigm. These days, in numerous languages of the world, it is being spoken again about Nikola Tesla and his scientific thought, which guides and inspires the avant-garde science. It does it through independent researchers who in their science include the spiritual sphere, from which they have been separated, historically, for a long time; and which has not yet been covered by mathematical language in the process of the spiritual-scientific unification (Abramovic, 2017). These are the early days of the science of consciousness and awareness and only time will show whether these efforts will be prolific. At the moment, a free spirit is necessary to make progress in the exploration of consciousness which is hidden and suppressed by ideological insistence on a materialistic paradigm which is not very different from that represented by Galileo in the 17th century and which still keeps the curtains over our understanding of the many unknowns including a change.

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Remembering where we came from; acknowledging who we have become today.

# Remembering where we came from; acknowledging who we have become today.

Katya Caruana

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## Summary

The following is a speech presented by Katya Caruana as part of the introductory processes of the International and Interdisciplinary Congress of Gestalt Therapy held in Belgrade, 2017

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be here with you today. I would like to thank Dr Lidija Pecotić and the Organising Committee for inviting me to deliver this short speech at the introduction of such an organised and well planned International and Interdisciplinary Congress of Gestalt Therapy, which is a special occasion for all of us here.

It is an occasion of sharing: our successes, our failures, our pleasures and pains: sharing life in our togetherness in our different contexts, with awareness.

We learn to trust once again notwithstanding the suffering that the world offers. Life has not been kind, life has brought sufferings and pains to each and every one of us, but we learn to deal with it differently. We realise we grew, we became wiser and in the meantime older in age, but yet younger in soul. In working through, we find ourselves, realising our new identities and in each of us we find one another, we meet one another on the Soul plane. We listen to ourselves in silence, a silence full of messages that are carried to us. We listen to each other not only with our ears but also with our hearts.

We learn to appreciate what is, and what is not. In touch with our senses, we see this now: we become, or hope to continue to become, authentic and pure. We embark on this lifelong journey of self discovery, and of relating to one another with fuller connectedness; of finding ourselves in one another. We see ourselves: innocent once again, living our truths. We touch one another not only by holding hands but through bonding, full contact; we bond through life itself.

Not saying that we don't have our own pains and difficulties, of course, but we learn to experience the world differently. It becomes beautiful in its own way, in good and in bad, in joy and in less joyful times. We become Gestalt, whole.

Dr Lidija Pecotić, or Lidija, as we all know her, for us is a key in this. She is the ground that holds us here. Her contribution towards the Gestalt way of life is such of an immeasurable value, now living this way of life and spreading it among others for 35 years or so, I believe. She teaches us life, love and laughter, not only by her words and wisdom but also through her way of Being. An incredible teacher of life, I would say.

A number of Gestalt Institutes are interconnected through her. With the birth in December 1990, the Gestalt Institute of Belgrade lead to the creation of the Gestalt Institute in Malta, the Gestalt Institute in Macedonia, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in Croatia and in Montenegro. Throughout the years working closely with and involved in assisting Lidija to support the Gestalt way for what it is and in the structure of the profession as such, I had the pleasure to meet and to get to know personally and professionally a number of people involved in the Institutes mentioned. I will mention some of them. Filip Stefanović, whose dedicated work and commitment allowed for the well-planned organisation of this Congress till the smallest detail, and Misa Avramović, who helped in the academic development and recognition of training in Gestalt, as well as Marija Stefanović who has just spoken and whose work and commitment contributed to the development of Gestalt therapy in this region, Sanela Selmanović from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Emilija Stoimenova-Canevska from Macedonia, who all started their professional identity here in Belgrade and continued in their countries.

Gestalt Psychotherapy as we knew it in the different Institutes has changed. We grew. Nowadays we are also quite structured and organised in living and in sharing Gestalt, not only as a way of life and healing but also as an academic and professional area of expertise. There is a totally different structure, which has been given to it, and it is being felt I believe especially in Malta after a number of processes for accreditation and recognition of Gestalt Psychotherapy by the competent authorities on the island. That meant a thorough restructuring in the organisation of our training, which is happening in all Training Centres mentioned.

By structuring ourselves, in a way, we got the opportunity to be recognised academically and professionally, and that meant that Gestalt Psychotherapy can become a discipline on its own merit, both socially and legally, and that is what is happening now in a lot of countries. Through this, perhaps, the Gestalt way may be shared more with others interested in the profession, and, in turn, with those who might need it most. More psychotherapists-to-be could become interested to delve into this discipline and graduate and get licensed in order to be in a professional position to help and to support those in greatest need of it: those suffering hardships, the socially emarginated and victims of any kind, those experiencing domestic abuse and drug addictions, among others, or those who just want to experience a different way of life, with more awareness, more contact-full - those who need to or want to work through and find themselves once again, afresh, in a different way and on a different plane with new zest for life. In the end it is all about justice, finding balance, and bringing healing to our Souls.

I mention this mostly as it touches me particularly since I work in the justice field in Malta. It is no co-incidence to me. The mixture, which is offered to me in this, of psychotherapy on one hand, and justice on the other, allows me a way of hopefully facilitating justice to others with a difference, perhaps bearing a more holistic approach. The world is sometimes unjust and unequal and trying to facilitate justice and access to justice for all for me has become a priority. That is perhaps my way of balancing it out. In my experience it is my way of healing and bringing things to a balance, presenting justice, not only to myself but also to others. Through this, I hope I can help others better and possibly also support their own meaning in their

Remembering where we came from; acknowledging who we have become today.

lives. In the end, I know myself better, each and every day. I acknowledge that my experience in Gestalt Psychotherapy, and my involvement in the field, have undoubtedly facilitated my transition and my growth in this. The grounding, the awareness, the spirit, the excitement, the here and now and the next, all contributed towards my development both personally and professionally.

I miss it sometimes that for now I can only be partially involved in Gestalt Psychotherapy as I am committed in the Public Service in my current directorate role in justice. That brings me restrictions in what I can do with my time. I do acknowledge, in the meantime, that my heart and soul are fully there, though, in Gestalt, and in trusting the Gestalt Process. I am ever grateful to Lidija who trusted me and by the time got me to be closely involved with her in her life in the Gestalt Institutes. I am deeply passionate about this, indeed.

Whether it is assisting in research, whether it is helping students in their own quest for knowledge and growth in one way or another, whether it is an involvement in administration, or in the philosophy of the training, or in giving some kind of advice, or support in assistance, which I know, or being involved in any other piece of work that relates to Gestalt or to Lidija is something which I do with love and passion. In the end, this is my support system, too. I do hope and wish to be sooner rather than later more formally involved with the Gestalt Institutes. Until then, I shall be taking care of my work in justice in the Gestalt way. And I shall make sure that any taste of Gestalt I could ever pass on to or share with others, contains the taste of justice, of healing and of balance, just the way I learned it through our teachers. I learned to be, I learned to give and to receive.

Let us all remember where we came from. Let us all transmit to others what we have learned and let us be shaped by the pure Gestalt concept of authenticity. Let us not leave this behind in bearing our new structure and identity. Let us keep a balance of both so that others after us would also have the privilege that we have had, and we have. Let us embrace our true being, whoever we are, whatever we may be, it does not make a difference. Let us come to our senses and be for whatever it is. Let us be invited to be ourselves, let us be present, and let us hold hands and touch hearts in listening to one another's stories.

Thank you all very much for your attention!



## **Katya Caruana**

Katya Caruana is engaged in the Public Service of Malta currently serving duties as Director of the Department of Justice within the Ministry for Justice, Culture and Local Government of Malta. She previously served for 13 years at the Office of the Chief Justice and President of the Court of Appeal of Malta as Private Secretary, administering the Chief Justice's Secretariat. She started her career in the Public Service at the Office of the Attorney General of the Republic.

She graduated with a Bachelor with Honours in Communications Studies and Psychology from the University of Malta (UOM) in 2002, having previously delved into law for one year. She continued her Post Graduate studies at the Gestalt Psychotherapy Training Institute Malta (GPTIM) and obtained the title of Gestalt Psychotherapist in 2012. She is a Registered Psychotherapist and graduated in the Master in Gestalt Psychotherapy at the GPTIM in 2016.

While exploring other avenues, she had, among others, explored photography and film iconography in the expressionist movie. In architectural photography, she had work published as front page cover of the UOM's Calendar (2003) and participated in a number of collective exhibitions, both national and international, among which were in Jin Tai Art Museum in Beijing, China (2005) and in Australia (2005). She was awarded a Certificate of Merit by the Malta Photographic Society.

Her time is focused nowadays in the justice sector and her love for psychotherapy.

