Editorial

Plus ça change, ça n’est plus la même chose:
Change as “Choiceful” Learning and Development

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Most of us are about as eager to be changed as we were to be born, and go through our changes in a similar state of shock.
– James Baldwin (1924-1987)
(American novelist, essayist, playwright, poet, and social critic)

The verb “to change” derives from the early thirteenth-century Old French word, “changier,” to change or alter; and from the Late Latin word “cambiare,” signifying “to barter, exchange.” The Collins World English Dictionary (2012) carries such nuanced entries as:

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1. to make or become different – alter;
2. to replace with or exchange for another (e.g., to change one’s name);
3. to transform or convert or be transformed or converted;
4. to give and receive (something) in return – interchange (e.g., to change places with someone);
5. to give or receive (money) in exchange for a smaller denomination or different currency;
6. to remove or replace the coverings of (e.g., to change a baby);
7. to put on other clothes;
8. to pass from one phase to the following one (e.g., the moon);
9. to operate (e.g., the gear lever of a motor vehicle);
10. to alight from (one bus, train, etc.) and board another;
11. to have a deeper tone, come to have a lower register (e.g., a boy’s voice).

And dictionary denotations continue:

Synonyms for change are: transmute, transform; vary, mutate; amend, modify. Change, alter both mean to make a difference in the state or condition of a thing or to substitute another state or condition. To change is to make a material difference so that the thing is distinctly different from what it was: to change one’s opinion. To alter is to make some partial change, as in appearance, but usually to preserve the identity.

It is not hard to see that the foregoing dictionary denotations of “change” do not do justice to the connotations of change implicit in the richly constructed culture of Gestalt theory and therapy: namely, that change implies development and growth, or as Sonia March Nevis puts it with poignant simplicity:

Asking people to change something implies that they are doing something wrong that has to be fixed. Asking people to develop something about themselves is asking them to add something that will be newly useful for them. It will energize them rather than discourage them. (Personal communication, 17 August 2012)

Underlying the “change” cluster in this number of Gestalt Review is precisely this expansive and broadening notion, or to reproduce less oft-cited words from Arnold R. Beisser’s (1970) by now iconic article:

The Gestalt therapist rejects the role of “changer,” for his strategy
is to encourage, even insist, that the [client] be where and what he is. He believes change does not take place by “trying,” coercion, or persuasion, or by insight, interpretation, or any other such means. Rather, change can occur when the [client] abandons, at least for the moment, what he would like to become and attempts to be what he is. (p. 77, emphasis in original)

The emphasis here is not so much on proactive change as on energized acquisition of the new.

The word “change” is used some 68 times by the authors and reviewers who have contributed to this issue of Gestalt Review. It figures explicitly in Rosalind Spigel’s reflections on “The Sacredness of Change: Coaching and Spiritual Practice,” and in the titles of two of the four books under review: Ruella Frank and Frances La Barre’s volume, The First Year and the Rest of Your Life: Movement, Development, and Psychotherapeutic Change (reviewed by Margherita Spagnuolo-Lobb); and Avrum Geurin Weiss’s publication, “change happens: When to Try Harder and When to Stop Trying So Hard (reviewed by Jane Honeck). The notion of “change” figures more or less implicitly in the other articles and reviews, whether from the perspective of ontology, as elaborated in Carmen Vázquez Bandín’s translated essay, “Espérame en el cielo: The Process of Grief According to Gestalt Therapy”; social responsibility and commitment, as articulated in Philip Lichtenberg’s piece, “Inclusive and Exclusive Aggression: Some (Gestalt) Reflections”; transsexuality, as discussed in Sarah Fallon’s article, “Sex, Gender and the Theatre of Self: Acting Theory in (Gestalt) Psychotherapy with a Transsexual Client”; organizational growth, as communicated in Mary Anne Walk’s conversation, “Clarity of Purpose and Strategy for Growth at the Gestalt International Study Center”; didactics and practicality, as developed in Dave Mann’s book, Gestalt Therapy: 100 Key Points and Techniques (reviewed by Stephanie Sabar); and finally, if not fundamendally, the paradoxical theory of change, as (re)presented in Liv Estrup’s film, Flying Without Wings, Life with Arnold Beisser (reviewed by James Weaver).

The composite of these articles, reflections, and reviews underscores – yet one more time – that the challenge of the Gestalt practitioner is to raise awareness of the individual, group, or organization in order for sustainable change to take place. The by now familiar paradox is that, the more a system attempts to be what it is not, the more it remains the same. Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose. Conversely, when people identify with their current experience, the conditions of wholeness and growth support change. Put another way, meaningful change (= growth and development) comes about, not so much by striving to be different, but as a result of “choiceful” awareness,
if not full acceptance, of what is. Gestalt International Study Center’s “Cape Cod Model of Change©,” to cite one example I have experienced, assumes that change can best be facilitated by attending to – and ultimately assimilating – what is well-developed and less developed in a system’s competencies. Only by becoming open to that which we have yet to learn can we experience, to greater or lesser degree, and for greater or lesser duration, the obverse of the status quo. Only then can it can it be posited, even if just in the here-and-now, that plus ça change, ça n’est plus la même chose – the more things change, the more they do not remain the same but develop and grow. Only then, arguably, do we stand a chance of mollifying our resistance to change; of not finding ourselves in the “state of shock” (p. 643) that, if we recall James Baldwin’s (1977/1985) remark above, the prospect of unsupported change can push us toward.

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REFERENCES

