Editorial

In the Shadow of the Leader:
The Growing Edge of (Gestalt) Groups

S U S A N L. F I S C H E R, P H . D.

The title for this editorial comes, unabashedly, from that of Peter Cole’s paper in this issue of Gestalt Review. Its subtitle is inspired by the name of an article appearing in the revised version of Beyond the Hot Seat Revisited: Gestalt Approaches to Group, edited by Bud Feder and Jon Frew (2008). And the editorial’s focal theme owes its existence in part to a photograph, reproduced below, taken by this writer as she walked on the path toward San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge late in 2008. Its figural shadow, or shadowy figure, depicted therein is (in her view) a graphic image of how, to cite Cole, “there will always be a shadow side to all experience; in accepting this truth, we learn to work with the shadow rather than to deny its existence” (p. 178).

Susan L. Fischer, Ph.D., is professor emerita of Spanish and Comparative Literature at Bucknell University (Lewisburg, Pennsylvania). She graduated from the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland’s Intensive Post-Graduate Program in Gestalt Methods in 1982; and in 2011, she completed the Cape Cod Training Program at the Gestalt International Study Center, where she is a Professional Associate. She is editor of Gestalt Review, offers GISC Writers’ Workshops, coaches individuals in writing for publication, translates articles on Gestalt topics from Spanish to English, and works as a simultaneous interpreter from Spanish to English and English to Spanish at Gestalt Therapy conferences (e.g., Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy in Puebla, Mexico, 2012). She has incorporated Gestalt perspectives into her teaching, as well as into some of her publications on seventeenth-century Spanish theatre. Fluent in French as well as Spanish, she divides her time between Brookline (Boston), Massachusetts and Tours, France.
The essays and commentaries in this number of the journal clearly add to the ongoing dialogue, if not dialectic, about (Gestalt) approaches to groups, shadow side and all.

G. A. Lahood’s article, which moves in many directions – from clinical practice, individual and group therapy, training, sociopolitical patterns of power and oppression, Gestalt thinking, anthropology, Shamanism, ecopsychology, relational spirituality, relational therapy, the author’s personal journey, all the way to spiritual and transpersonal research – proposes fundamentally that “the Gestalt community may have something – perhaps something subtle – yet to learn about the experiential gradations of collaboration and democracy in group life, which could be applied to therapy, group, and organizational work” (p. 127). Lahood focuses in particular on the practice of co-inquiry, according to which participants are inducted into the method in an atmosphere of “engaged collaboration” to foster an “emotional climate” that empowers them. Co-inquiry, in his opinion, can serve as an antidote, for example, to the narcissistic needs of a group leader as identified by Gary Yontef (1993, p. 307); or to the question of “who possesses the power to confer meanings” (Staemmler, 1997, p. 142).
Responses to Lahood’s paper through the Commentaries are wide-ranging, providing a healthy forum for provocative discussion and debate. Sylvia Crocker acknowledges in Commentary I that the focus of co-inquiry on gaining knowledge from shared experience, guided by the principles of collaboration and democracy, “prompted” her to reflect about the part these play in Gestalt therapy’s use of the phenomenological method. In her view, members of Gestalt groups and organizations can begin to internalize the kind of philosophy characteristic of co-inquiry groups by practicing a number of behaviors involved in dealing constructively with conflict, which she then details. Nevertheless, Crocker does not find “personally appealing” the topics Lahood suggests Gestalt therapists might investigate together using the co-inquiry model, such as “co-research in the realm of the ‘between,’” or “how to get a client support from a ‘trans-organismic’ field” (p. 150).

Philip Lichtenberg, in Commentary II, finds “exciting” the attention Lahood’s article pays to the promotion of democracy in the form of collaborative inquiry. This is because it involves “the active participation of all who are subjects and objects of the phenomena in the investigation” (p. x), whether individually or in groups, so that “study is done with the participants, not on them” (p. 156), emphasis in original). Lichtenberg, however, finds a “key fuzziness” (p. 157) in Lahood’s argument regarding the role of authority in group process: if, on the one hand, he “tells us that a facilitator starts a group and then joins it as a simple, equal member,” on the other, he “implies that because Gestalt therapy means that a therapist is present, a limit is put on how that person can become an equal member of the group” – at which point he “slides off into a talk of shamans and magicians, the spiritual” (p. 157). Lichtenberg laments the lack of a discussion of the “sociopolitical base” that was so crucial in the work of the founders of Gestalt therapy, and that has recently been documented in Mending the World: Social Healing Interventions by Gestalt Practitioners Worldwide, edited by Joseph Melnick and the late Edwin C. Nevis (2009/2013). In turning to the spiritual rather than underscoring the political, Lichtenberg believes that Lahood’s article reflects the “split” (in his, Lichtenberg’s, mind) “between religion and radical politics” (p. 158).

Dan Bloom, in Commentary III, opines that by focusing on non-authoritarian and democratic values, Lahood does not add anything “new” to the literature critical of that style, but only “joins contemporary Gestalt therapy’s ‘relational turn’ criticism of the so-called individualistic model, authoritarian group processes, and non-egalitarian approaches” undertaken, for example, by Lynne Jacobs and Rich Hycner (1995; see also Jacobs and Hycner, 2009), Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb (2001), and Gary Yontef (2009). Bloom poses what is for him an important question: “Do we need cooperative inquiry to continue our ‘relational turn’?” (p. 162). He also queries the extent to which
the notions of “relational spirituality” and “spiritual rebirth” are useful in the understanding and practice of Gestalt therapy, questioning what spirituality itself really means. At the same time, Lahood’s inquiries into co-inquiry and relational spirituality “incite” Bloom to reflect further on a related issue, to wit, the need for more precision in how the terms “contact” and “contacting” are used to articulate the phenomenology of Gestalt therapy.

Lahood addresses the foregoing issues in his Response, and more. He reinforces his commitment to co-created spirituality, sliding in a reference to his critique of traditional religion, popular transpersonalism, New Age religion, and its shamanism (“left at the margins for legitimate reasons” in his current article), in order to underscore that “co-inquiry, especially when it is involved in matters transpersonal/spiritual, goes forward with a deconstruction of religious authoritarianism and correlate-spiritual projection” (p. 174).

Peter Cole, “In the Shadow of the Leader: Power, Reflection, and Dialogue in Gestalt Group Therapy,” rounds out the polarities in the discussion by offering well-pointed vignettes to illustrate that “all group leaders must necessarily hold some aspects of the field out of awareness in order to focus on other dimensions of the field.” This is because “the shadow of the leader is always shifting, is field dependent, and is co-created by all the people in the group who comprise the field” (p. 185, emphasis added). Cole’s point is that “when group members feel seen, shadow sides and all, when they can speak their truth about the group and its leaders and continue to be accepted, then they are on the road to achieving an authentic sense of belonging” (p. 188). Cole asks an important question: “Can the group discuss, process, and make contact with the leader’s uses and misuses of power if we suffer from an illusion that a differential in power does not exist?” (p. 186).

Joel Latner’s lengthy Reflection, “Fritz Perls in Berlin and After: Apropos Fritz Perls in Berlin 1893-1933: Expressionism, Psychoanalysis, Judaism,” is inspired by what he considers to be Bernd Bocian’s “excellent” work on the subject. Latner’s piece is a thought-provoking attempt to redeem the personage of Gestalt therapy’s founder who arguably exists in the shadow of his followers, given that he has been (in the reviewer’s judgment) “regularly pilloried, or ignored, or damned with faint praise” (p. 189). Latner underscores Perls’s early existence in Germany in the context of intellectual and cultural currents in Europe (e.g., the theatre of Max Reinhardt; the Dada movement), so that the man who founded Gestalt therapy might be seen sans shadow, if you will, “with the dirt rubbed off and the fog blown away” (p. 198).

Lastly, Ansel Woldt’s review of Edward W. L. Smith volume of collected essays, Embodied Gestalt Practice: Selected Papers of Edward W. L. Smith, is as much about the soul of a man as it is about the corpus of his writings on numerous topics in Gestalt theory and practice.
As a final word, the editor would like to remark on the passing shadow of a Gestalt leader – Joseph H. Handlon, Ph.D. – who died on 22 April 2013 at the age of 93. Handlon served *Gestalt Review* well as a long-standing member of the editorial board and the author of many articles. Coincidentally, in respect of this issue’s focus on (Gestalt) groups, he co-authored, with his wife Isabel Fredericson, Ph.D., a paper that some of you may wish to dip into – “What Changes the Individual in Gestalt Groups?: A Proposed Theoretical Model” – which appeared in the journal in 1998. We extend our deepest sympathy to Isabel Fredericson and to the extended family. An obituary is forthcoming.

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**REFERENCES**


