Editorial

The Gestalt Profession: An Open System

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The title for this editorial comes unabashedly from Susan Roos’s Postscript to Paul Barber’s Dialogue with Roos’s article, “Chronic Sorrow and Ambiguous Loss: Gestalt Methods for Coping with Grief,” whose springboard was Barber’s paper, “Living Gestalt Moments with Anna: A Spiritual Journey through Alzheimer’s.” Roos deems that “professions that look out from themselves to other disciplines and to other sources of understanding the human condition are advantaged by openness”; such open systems, she states, “are better able to avoid becoming stale, insular, irrelevant, and concretized.” It would seem that the material in this issue attests to the fact that the Gestalt profession is indeed an open, evolving system.

Barber’s spiritual journal through the Alzheimer’s affliction of his partner Anna is intended, from the perspective of phenomenological research, to shed light on how Gestalt, “in service to life and experiential learning,
generates soulful inquiry.” In his introspective study, he records his immediate reflections under the heading of “Now,” biographical information under “Then,” and other insights under “Contemplations” – all with the purpose of “facing ‘the void,’ to confront ‘the unknown,’ to reclaim our potential and fuller sense of being.” The phenomenological research approach he deploys in journaling about the profound loss of his soulmate of 35 years, who is drifting away, reveals an adherence to a method of inquiry that eschews, what is for him, “the objectification of human experience and quantitative inquiry” associated with “academia.” He feels “disturbed” by what he sees as Roos’s representative presentation of “an over-clinical and objective stance. . . , wandering into more orthodox pseudo-scientific territory.”

Roos, for her part, suggests that chronic sorrow is a lens for viewing a living loss such as Anna’s; it refers to “frequently misunderstood, unrecognized, pervasive, continuing, and resurgent grief responses that result from coping with ongoing loss due to significant permanent injury, illness, disability, or progressive deterioration of oneself (self-loss) or another living person (other-loss) to whom there is a deep attachment.” She also invokes the concept of ambiguous loss: a construct that “emphasizes losses related to another person who is psychologically absent and physically present.” Roos notes that if “ambiguous loss” is a concept that has evolved more recently than “chronic sorrow,” there are overlaps between them, especially with regard to issues that render grief unresolved.

Significantly, these two methodologically divergent approaches to research – one that seeks to illuminate the “complex interplay cementing Gestalt to field theory, phenomenological inquiry, mindfulness and spirituality” (Barber), and another that demonstrates a more “clinical and objective” stance (Roos) – are testimony to the richness and openness of the field encompassed by Gestalt theory and practice. This topic will be explored from yet another perspective in an article authored by Philip Brownell – “C’mon Now; Let’s Get Serious About Research” – forthcoming in Gestalt Review, 18.1 (along with commentaries by Todd Burley, Mark McConville, and Leanne O’Shea). The paper considers “a contemporary philosophy of science as a product of naturalism, critical realism, and post-positivism” and offers a contrast between the views of some prominent Gestalt therapists and a pro-research oriented perspective.

Jon Frew, in “Gestalt Therapy Training and Research: Holding Our Place at Academic Institutions in the USA,” offers his viewpoint on the status of research at Pacific University (Forest Grove, Oregon), concluding that “Gestalt therapy training and research can still take place within academic institutions and not be left solely to be carried on by Gestalt therapy training institutes.” In Commentary I, “Eddy in the Mainstream: Gestalt Subversion Amidst Academic Tyranny,” Peter Mortola details how a course he teaches at Lewis and Clark
College (Portland, Oregon) – Expressive Arts Therapy – also contributes to the visibility of Gestalt methods in the Academy, specifically with regard to Violet Oaklander’s work with children. And, in Commentary II, Seán Gaffney shares his experience of Gestalt-oriented research programs at doctoral level in parts of Northern Europe (i.e., Sweden, Norway, and Britain).

These issues are complemented, in truly open fashion, by Frank-M. Staemmler’s essay on “Pain and Beauty,” in which he draws on myriad sources – philosophical, psychological, and poetic – to suggest that “pain and beauty are not polarities in the narrow sense of the term, but that many of their respective features have polar qualities.” If pain is understood as “the herald of death and dying,” and beauty is seen as “the promise of happiness,” there are occasions when pain can turn into beauty, and vice versa. Staemmler ends by pointing out that this polarity is captured linguistically, for example, in an Italian idiom that connects beauty with dying: bello da morire [beautiful to die for]. (An editorial aside: Is this linguistic example perhaps evocative of the controversial hypothesis, advanced by Edward Sapir in 1929 and subsequently developed by Benjamin Whorf, that the structure of a language determines a native speaker’s perception and categorization of experience?)

In the section on Reflections, Dan Bloom engages in dialogic conversation with Philip Lichtenberg’s (2012) paper – “Inclusive and Exclusive Aggression: Some (Gestalt) Perspectives” – in order to posit a “window to the next resistance” that can emerge from Lichtenberg’s own ideas. Is this not a model way of putting into practice the plea, made by Roos (cited above), for Gestalt to remain an open system and not succumb to becoming stale, insular, irrelevant, and concretized?

Archie Roberts, in his review of Teaching a Paranoid to Flirt: The Poetics of Gestalt Therapy by Michael Vincent Miller (2011), observes that all the while the book invokes myriad questions of theoretical, clinical, ethical, aesthetic, literary, artistic, and philosophical interest, at its core, it is “about psychotherapy itself – and about psychotherapy’s special relationship with the act of poiesis in its original sense: that of creating, or making.” And, as if creatively conjured, Seán Gaffney and Cynthia Hogue grace the issue with poems that deal with “Family Matters” on the one hand, and a tribute to the memory of a loved one, on the other.

Lastly, Erving Polster’s obituary for the late Joseph Handlon is a moving homage to a man and colleague who was the epitome of openness and flexibility: for example, in his ability to shift “from a steadily grounded, socially honored university position into one which was responsive to a cultural sweep, moving society into a new absorption with the landscape of human experience,” when he left Case Western Reserve University to head psychology at the Fielding Institute.
And so we come full circle to the co-presence of Gestalt in the academy and in institutes beyond – always with a place for a multiplicity of approaches and perspectives – where the phenomenological/qualitative, and the more “objectively” clinical/quantitative, forms of inquiry can co-exist at different points of an open continuum.

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REFERENCE