...[S]pirituality is not a simple reflex of hunger and fear. It is an expression of the will to live, the burning desire of the creature to count, to make a difference on the planet because he has lived, has emerged on it, and has worked, suffered and died [Becker, 1975, p. 3].

The word spirituality has been part of our everyday lexicon for quite some time, but only recently has it become a legitimate topic for therapeutic and organizational dialogue. Why the time gap, and why the increased attention now?

The gap may be a response to a long held principle in many therapeutic circles—namely, that religion (I do not necessarily mean religious experience) and therapy are separate domains and should not be mixed. I believe that this value has been especially true for Gestalt practitioners. Words such as spirit, transcendence, and transpersonal seem too closely linked to organized religion for many Gestaltists who, by nature, have an aversion to anything that might smack of rigidity or rule-bound beliefs. Paradoxically, our approach is designed to create experiences that are similar to many modes of spiritual practice. Our focus on here and now, present-centered awareness, is not very different from a focus on mindfulness, peak experience, and meditation, concepts that form the core of many spiritual, transpersonal, and religious traditions. As “spiritual” topics, such as the effects of prayer, meditation, belief, and faith, become part of our therapeutic conversation, a deeper discussion is needed within Gestalt

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circles. Whatever our understanding of the forces that have pushed this concept into the forefront of therapeutic (and societal) consciousness, the phenomenon cannot be denied. What is Spirituality?

In a recent conference, “The Seven Deadly Sins,” we found that we could not discuss sin without an opposite concept; i.e., spirituality. Trying to deconstruct this complex word, we soon found that it had many meanings. We arrived at two primary working definitions of spirituality: first, an abstraction that helps us organize our relationship to the unknown; and second, one’s spirit, the use of one’s energy in the world.

We examined spirituality using the Cycle of Experience and some of its essential components; i.e., sensation, awareness, energy, action, and meaning making (Zinker, 1977). Through sensation we experience a wide range of feelings—fear, joy, anxiety, and bliss, for example. To be spiritual is to allow all of these feelings to co-exist without judgment so that they may grow into awareness.

Moving to awareness, we continue to experience sensations, but also notice the field: the context that includes self, the other, our community, and our world. A spiritual life thus would encompass a relationship to all of these aspects as well as to the unknown. As our energy builds, our spirit becomes organized for directed action. Energy in and of itself creates change when directed at the other. To be spiritual is to use our energy to move towards the other, towards contact, to not withdraw reflexively but, whenever possible, to mobilize ourselves to meet the other at the boundary. As energy supports the many small actions that make up our day, we can choose actions and behaviors that enhance our interactions. Spiritual actions allow us to make the best of what is and support us in co-creating encounters that are useful, beautiful, and lively. Last, meaning making allows us to look back and make sense of our experience. A spiritual stance involves a willingness to acknowledge that much of life is beyond our control, along with the ability to live fully and gracefully with this knowledge.

**Our Current Issue**

A rich conversation about spirituality comprises most of this issue. It includes a theoretical discussion comparing and contrasting Gestalt theory with spirituality, and it attempts to integrate Gestalt theory with the transpersonal. This is important since both Gestalt and transpersonal approaches grew out of the humanistic movement and have much in common. Of equal importance, this discussion also includes articles on practice. How does one utilize a spiritual template in both our therapeutic and organizational lives?

We begin with “Spirituality and Gestalt: A Gestalt-Transpersonal Perspective,” by Lynn Williams, in which she presents her definition of spirituality and describes

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1 There have been a number of Gestalt authors who have written on this topic in English as well as other languages. Examples of English articles include Crocker (1999), Hycner (1988), O’Neill (2001), Schoen (1994), and Wolfert (2000). However, given the attention in the general press, I believe that we are just beginning to give it the attention that it demands.


3 As Brownell points out in his commentary, the definitions and responses to this term are seemingly endless.
a map for spiritual development. Knowing that this was an ideal topic for dialogue, we invited commentaries by Duey Freeman, Philip Brownell, and Nigel Copsey, all Gestalt practitioners and all from diverse spiritual/religious traditions. Their different perspectives help us to appreciate the complexity of the issue. The authors address several important issues. Does spirituality involve a developmental process? Does it refer to a transcendental quality? Is the spiritual process subjective, cognitive, relational, or intersubjective? Is spirituality an “it,” a feeling, or is it a world view? What is the relationship between spirituality and religion; for example, between Christian and Buddhist traditions?

The authors also look at the theoretical assumptions underlying transpersonal and Gestalt approaches. They outline areas in which the two theories are incompatible, and what they have to offer each other. For example, Freeman takes issue with Ken Wilber’s model, describing spirituality as hierarchical and thus incomparable with Gestalt’s field orientation. He presents a compelling argument that Gestalt theory, by itself, is adequate without the need of an overlaying spiritual model such as Wilber’s to complete it. Freeman argues that there is “little or no difference between Transpersonal and the Gestalt process.” He continues, “Gestalt by its very nature is transpersonal.”

Brownell also rejects Wilber’s model, agreeing with Freeman that there is no need for a new lexicon. He is clear about what spirit is. It is God. He goes on to describe his faith, listing many similarities with the Gestalt approach.

Copsey informs us of his work in which individuals are given spiritual needs assessments designed to cover all aspects of a person’s spiritual life. He develops the concept of “spiritual longing” and how the need is met, focusing on religious affiliation and highlighting a group of individuals for whom the traditional organized religions do not suffice. In her rejoinder, Williams discusses a number of Gestalt topics such as I-Thou relationships, intersubjectivity, and, most interestingly, the topic of spiritual development.

The discussion of Gestalt and the transpersonal is approached in a different way by Deborah Bowman and Tricia A. Leakey in “The Power of Gestalt Therapy in Accessing the Transpersonal: Working with Physical Difference and Disability,” and by Paul Barber in “Group as Teacher: The Gestalt-informed Peer Learning Community as a Transpersonal Vehicle for Organizational Healing.” These authors, after outlining their understanding of a transpersonal approach, apply a transpersonal template to real life training and work. Bowman and Leakey use a largely intrapsychic, therapy-oriented format, while Barber uses a more interpersonal, organizational one.

Bowman and Leakey, using the frame of a graduate class, describe therapeutic processes as enacted within an educational situation. Students experience individual experiments in a group context designed to heighten awareness. Trainee and teacher take turns describing and analyzing the students’ experiences using a Gestalt/transpersonal lens. Viewing the transpersonal and the spiritual as domains, they demonstrate how the Gestalt approach provides the means of spiritual access.

Barber presents a case study that examines a Gestalt-informed peer learning community in a university setting. The organization, abandoned by a charismatic leader, is supported in its healing process as the 24 participants with varying educational back-
grounds meet in a series of intense academic experiential workshops. He details his learning as a change agent, and describes his views of Gestalt as a spiritual approach.

As usual, we end this issue of Gestalt Review with Back Pages, featuring a report of the “Doing It Better” conference, and reviews of two important books: Woldt and Toman’s (eds.) Gestalt Therapy: History Theory and Practice, reviewed by Marijane Fall, and Joan Benevento’s A Self-Regulated Learning Approach for Children with Learning/Behavior Disorders, reviewed by Marlene Blumenthall. The “Doing it Better” conference focused entirely on Gestalt institutes and their concerns and issues. Woldt and Toman’s book represents a milestone. It is the most comprehensive English language book published in many years designed for the teaching of Gestalt therapy in academic institutions as well as institutes. Benevento’s book is also important in that it deals with the concept of development in children who experience learning problems. This topic has rarely been addressed from a Gestalt perspective.

REFERENCES


In Memory of Reinhard Fuhr

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