Guest Editorial

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One of the things Dick Kitzler generously shared with me, when we had our single, long conversation more than thirty years ago, was the memory of his own period of training with Fritz and Laura Perls, Paul Goodman, and other members of the inner circle during the founding of Gestalt therapy in the early 1950s, when I too first met some of these extraordinary people. Kitzler remarked on how, not only for him and other young apprentices like Isadore From or George Dennison, sitting at the edge of the circle, but also for their mentors in the center, those sessions served simultaneously as training, therapy, and epiphany. Finding words for this fusion is not so easy. I am uncomfortable already, trying to sum up what Kitzler conveyed so much better in anecdote, with his love of gossip and his taste for ironic details. But I shall summarize two such anecdotes, both involving Goodman and Paul Weisz, that may suggest why I feel so at a loss for words:

Kitzler regarded Paul Weisz as Goodman’s only true peer in the group. He remembered the two Pauls having fierce arguments with each other. One of them ended with Weisz telling...
Goodman that he was incompetent as a therapist. “You have no business seeing the patients you see!” Everyone present knew that Weisz himself took clients no one else would come near outside an institution, while Goodman rarely saw anyone with psychotic symptoms.

On another occasion Weisz suddenly asked Goodman, “Where do you live?” “Why do you want to know,” Goodman responded, almost automatically, “to draw up papers on me?” Everyone turned and stared; Fritz uttered a long low whistle of amazement.

Against such dramatic scenes and dialogue, especially as Kitzler could bring them to life, far beyond my dim rendering of them here, I personally find all theoretical abstraction like a pale moon: it can look quite striking in the sky but does not light up the landscape very well. And so I must admit I am an ambivalent moon-watcher as I turn now to my task of introducing the reader to the essays and commentaries in this new issue of Gestalt Review. With the exceptions of Dan Bloom’s loving farewell to Dick Kitzler, and the diary-like memoir by Jack Neggerman and Claire Asherson Bartram of their pilgrimage to Lake Cowichan, evoked in the formerly denominated Back Pages now re-baptized Reviews and Reflections, all of the earnest, sometimes passionate writing in the following pages wrestles with issues of theory, “unfinished business” left over from the theorizing of the founders’ generation.

Theorizing can bring out a certain statue-toppling/hero-propping disposition in people. The tone here is reverent but the revisionist agenda is to show that the formulations of Perls and Goodman were only temporarily adequate to phenomena such as self and self-regulation. What pedagogic schema should replace the well-known strategy of Kitzler and From, who worked through volume 2 of the sacred text sentence by sentence? Exchanges get intense. Instead of West Coast vs. East Coast camps, it now seems to be Cleveland vs. NYC – or is it Old Guard vs. New? There are moments when Seán Gaffney in “The Cycle of Experience Re-Cycled: Then, Now ... Next?” and Dan Bloom in Commentary I seem to be “hammering” at each other like Weisz and Goodman, though not so brutally ad hominem; one is sure they will enjoy a friendly meal afterward with the benign Edwin Nevis, who offers us his measured viewpoint in Commentary II. We also find ghostly antagonists in other articles here, hovering in the background of efforts by Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb, in “Is Oedipus Still Necessary in the Therapeutic Room? Sexuality and Love as Emerging at the Contact-Boundary in a Situational Field,” and Philip Brownell, in “Executive Functions: A Neuropsychological Understanding of Self-Regulation,”
to clarify certain heightened moments at the contact-boundary: Brownell considers the executive functions of the neo-cortex; Spagnuolo Lobb wonders about eros in the therapy session. One can hear the subtexts plainly: Perls and Goodman were notoriously familiar with their patients, though it does not bear repeating here. And what neuroscience calls executive function Goodman termed presentness and creative adjustment, putting his emphasis on everyday experience at the contact boundary, rather than the conservative neurophysiology that supports such contact “superveniently” on the organismic side of the interface with novelty.

All of these thoughtful authors are concerned with heuristic pedagogy, new ways of coming to terms with the original demand of Gestalt therapy for a theory of the self that would do justice to its vital nature. While refining their abstractions, they are careful to remind us that there could also be a phenomenological account of self and self-regulation, of insight and love, to help us understand what they are trying to distill taxonomically. But phenomenology does not readily comport with taxonomy, however essential some kind of reaching out must be to escape mere verbalizing and remember what it means to be alive. Your guest editorialist is just another word-struck pedagogue, but – lucky for me! – I teach poetry rather than Gestalt theory. It is not so hard to find a poem that reads like emergent experience itself; here is one by the Spanish poet Antonio Machado (1875-1939), in Robert Bly’s marvelous translation:

There are two sorts of consciousness: there are two sorts of consciousness.
One involves light, one patience. Una es luz, y otra, paciencia.
One has to do with piercing
the ocean a little with light;
the other has more guilt –
with net or pole, one waits
like a fisherman, for fish.
Tell me: Which is better?
Religious consciousness
that sees in the deep ocean
fish alive,
going their way,
that will never be caught?
Or this job I have, boring,
picking fish from the net
and throwing them on the sand, dead?

Hay dos modos de consciencia:
uno es luz, y otra, paciencia.
Una estriba en alumbrar
un poquito el hondo mar;
otra, en hacer penitencia
con caña o red, y esperar
el pez, como pescador.
Dime tú: ¿Cuál es mejor?
¿Conciencia de visionario
que mira en el hondo acuario
peces vivos,
fugitivos,
que no se pueden pescar,
o esa maldita faena
de ir arrojando a la arena
muertos, las peces del mar?

(Proverbios y Cantares, XXXV)

To my mind, Machado’s poem confronts the challenge inherent in all pedagogy – how to convey the living mystery that lesson plans and flow
charts systematize. Like Melville’s sub-librarian in *Moby Dick*, we teachers throw our harpoons and nets into the ocean, and pull out dead fish.

Earlier this week I asked my students in “English 272G” what they hoped for in our semester of reading and writing poems. They had already read Machado’s poem, along with others by the Persian mystic Rumi and the Czech immunologist Miroslav Holub. One young man surprised me with the following answer, which I would like to share as exemplary phenomenology of the emergent self:

I’ve practiced martial arts for ten years, and played guitar for about the same. They’re so different on the outside, but at the core they’re reflections of each other through me as a medium. One can’t separate the arts completely. I know this because with both arts I’ve come to a point of mental and physical exhaustion, with only my will power to make me continue. And in these moments something happens: something takes over when this happens, I’ll perform a spectacular solo, or beat opponents with much more skill and experience than me. It’s never flashy, just totally honest, and totally simple. Afterwards, I literally don’t remember moving my body or fingers. It feels like a dream. I want to transfer this to poetry. I want to let these words just come out of me, honest, simple, but devastatingly real. Through arts people express themselves, but also learn about themselves. I guess I want to know who I am in words.

At the risk of turning my student’s testimony into another dead mackerel, let me add a few measurements of his catch. We all know what he is talking about, we have experienced it ourselves, though in its very nature such experience is not conscious, and as he points out, not even memorable, but more like the ordinary daylight that goes unnoticed though the world is visible only because of it. We are most alive in the midst of such light, but not when we take hold of it like a prism, turning it this way and that to marvel or to understand – though that too is deeply human, and the core of both theory and phenomenology. Moreover, healthy and engaged experience is not the only way we grow. We learn many lessons of self-regulation from suffering, rarely a matter of complete absorption in moments of contact. Neither are the “arts” my student practices the only boats afloat. Nonetheless, I do believe that he has put his phenomenological finger on the essence of what we pedagogues mean when we chalk on the blackboard terms like contact boundary, emergent self, executive function, cycle of experience, sequence of contact – as in the thought-provoking essays and reviews I now invite you to read. It cannot be wholly by accident that
Susan Roos’s review of *Panic Attacks and Postmodernity: Gestalt Therapy Between Clinical and Social Perspectives*, edited by Gianni Francesetti, and Robert Farrands’s commentary on Trevor Bentley and Howard Boorman’s monograph, *Moments of Leadership: Leadership with a Gestalt Focus*, provide food for further thought in this latest issue of *Gestalt Review*.

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