Editorial

Paradox, Growth, and Creation: Gestalt and the “Age of Chemistry”

SUSAN L. FISCHER, PH.D.

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So it is now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

(William Wordsworth, 26 March 1802, as cited in Hutchinson & de Selincourt, 1964, p. 62)

If the ordered, scientific universe of Sir Isaac Newton (1643-1727) was dominated by physics and mechanics, in which everything was potentially explicable and deducible and the world was a complete and settled whole, the newer universe of Joseph Priestly (1733-1804) and Sir Humphry Davy (1778-1829) was imbued with the excitement of chemistry and electricity, of “action and re-action, of formation and transformation” (Danby, 1960, pp. 10, 12). If one could arguably be denominated the “Age of Physics,” the other could “fancifully” be dubbed the “Age of Chemistry.” The individual’s relation to the “Age of Chemistry”¹ was neither that of “spectator” nor of “fixed part in a stable whole” but of “an identity both acting and re-acting, formed and formative”: in chemistry, simply put, “two different things [i.e., elements] are brought together, a sudden interaction takes place, and instead of the two things there is a third completely different from either” (p. 12).

If one pushes this argument to its logical conclusion, as one literary critic/reader exhorts us to do, the poetry of William Wordsworth (1770-1850) can be described as “the poetry of chemistry,” in that he used “the language of action and re-action to define the experience put into his poetry” (Danby, 1960, p. 12). For example, in his “poem referring to the period of childhood”—“The Rainbow”—(reproduced above), a re-action takes place between the man and the rainbow in the “now,” in what may be called a “dialogue,” in a universe that involves “process, formation, and transformation” (p. 13). The interesting point here is the critical reading proffered of the oft-quoted, and oft-misunderstood, final three verses:

‘Natural piety’ has nothing to do with ‘nature’ in the hikers’ sense. And the piety is not church-bound. Wordsworth is thinking, as the psychiatrists [and Gestaltists] do, of how one lived experience interacts with all the others, and how the unified and harmonious mind is ideally one in which youth, maturity, and age continue to reflect and regenerate each other. The Child is father of the Man. The parent principle of continuing growth is the power of fresh response. On this man [sic] depends still for all those moments of renewable experience he is capable of. (Danby, 1960, pp. 13-14, italics in original)

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Why this fanciful foray into the disparate universes of physics, chemistry, and rainbows? The foregoing focus on action, reaction, formation, and transformation is informed, to greater or lesser degree, by virtually all of the

¹ Danby (1960) reminds us that if the physicist worked with mathematics and measurement in the late eighteenth century, the chemist at the time of the Chemical Revolution was “capable of being portrayed, as [John] Dalton [1766-1844] was, kneeling beside a bog collecting marsh gas, helped by a small boy and his tiddler-jar [i.e., jar of small fish]” (p. 12). I was fortunate to find this “old chestnut” of a book on Wordsworth’s early poetry ensconced in the library of the Université François-Rabelais (Tours, France). The inspiration for this editorial comes from Brian O’Neill’s article on Gestalt, Wordsworth, and Buber, included in this issue of Gestalt Review.

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material contained in this issue of *Gestalt Review*. Herb Stevenson’s article, “Paradox: A Gestalt Theory of Change for Organizations,” looks at various polarities that underpin Gestalt theory and draws on a number of current and historical figures with connections to the Gestalt approach (e.g., Friedlaender, Smuts, Wilber) to achieve a new formation and integration. In order to be able to change, an individual (or an organization) must be willing to approach problems in a radically different way by identifying with the opposing perspective; “[w]hen this happens,” says Stevenson, “polar differentiations melt into creative indifference, fresh possibilities emerge, and the client is free to step into an entirely new ‘what is’” (p. 125 below).

Nigel Copsey’s Commentary on Stevenson’s article presents two scenarios in the work place in inner London, in which the “paradoxical theory of change” is applicable as a “lens through which we are able to understand the difficulties that arise both in organisations and in society as a whole” (p. 130 below). Implicit in his observations, perhaps, is a kind of “reaction-formation” (as opposed to reaction and formation, leading to transformation)—if we are permitted this wordplay—that can occur when people do not want to move into the “fertile void.” As a coda, Copsey speaks of the 2010 British election, in which the polls were indicating that the public no longer wanted a polarized form of government, though few apprehended what it might mean to move into the fertile void.

In his Commentary, Alan Meara maintains that the “paradoxical theory of change” is insufficient, observing, along with Stevenson, that it is only implicit in the Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman text of 1951. Meara offers some thoughts on a more comprehensive Gestalt-based model of change which, if it integrates many of the concepts touched upon by Stevenson, also draws on the “Unit of Work” model based on a schema initially outlined by Sonia M. Nevis for the evolution of the Gestalt experiment; as well on as a multi-mode model of change constructed by Andrew H. Van de Ven and Marshall S. Poole, which invokes Klaus F. Riegel’s theory of change: “the dialectics of human development.” In the meta-model of Gestalt change theory proposed by Meara, paradox is replaced by “experiential ‘knowing.’”

Jay Levin’s article, “Gestalt Therapy: Now and for Tomorrow,” argues that Gestalt therapy, by introducing “an epistemology to psychology that challenges the mechanistic, technical, and outcome-oriented approaches of scientism and globalization” (p. 147 below) is more concerned with rehabilitation and healing than with simple cure. Given that Gestalt therapy’s model of growth takes in the potential of the organism to co-create, together with its environment, “a place where organismic needs and the resources for life converge to provide a place of human habitation,” the process of “journeying and dwelling” that is the matter of psychotherapy is, finally, “an invitation to sacred ground” (p. 147 below). A healer for now and tomorrow is obliged to care for the environment and the community by attending, not only to “the transpersonal and spiritual interiority of people’s souls,” but also to an array of political and socio-economic issues such as globalization (p. 148 below). “Although political work is more than therapy,” Levin avows, “therapy is certainly political” (p. 167 below).

Brian O’Neill’s article, “Being Present to the Emergent Creation of the Field: Wordsworth, Buber, and Gestalt Therapy,” is an experiment in exploring two principles of the field perspective recently described in the literature by O’Neill and Seán Gaffney as “emergent creation” and “paradoxical agency.” O’Neill, in this current paper, draws on Joel Latner’s (2008) alternative notion of defining things that possess a “connotative richness,” not by seeking out “precise and interlocked statements, denotatively,” but by searching for examples that “speak to us” (p. 27). O’Neill’s article, therefore, aims to be not just another critique of field theory but a creative way of extending and expanding the field perspective (to denote that it is wider than a single theory alone; and that it encompasses the main points of the theories of both Perls et al., and Lewin). O’Neill summons up other sources that go beyond traditional Gestalt therapy theory and “speak to” the “connotatively rich” principles of emergent creation and paradoxical agency: the poetry of William Wordsworth and the philosophical writings of Martin Buber.

Also included in this issue of *Gestalt Review* are: book reviews by Mary Grace Neville and Deborah Ullman; poems by Charles Bowman and Seán Gaffney; and reflections on group process by Carmen Vázquez Bandín—all of which work synergistically to complement or enhance one another or one or more of the articles discussed above. Neville’s review of the 2008 republication of *Beyond the Hot Seat Revisited: Gestalt Approaches to Groups*, edited by Bud Feder and Jon Frew, suggests how the book can appeal, albeit in different ways, as much to therapists and trainers as to social activists and entrepreneurial educators. It might be read in conjunction with the “Reflections on Process Groups at the 11th International Gestalt Therapy Conference (‘The Union of Differences’), Madrid, April 2009,” offered by Vázquez as conference organizer. This is especially so in respect of the final task of sharing, which enabled individual process groups to experience a “collective, yet paradoxically individual and unique, closing” (p. 202 below). In deeming Mariah Fenton Gladis’s *Tales of a Wounded Healer: Creating Exact Moments of Healing* “refreshing for those of us who straddle the worlds of healing arts and the differently circumscribed domain of psychotherapy” (p. 189 below), Ullman offers another source that goes beyond the traditional Gestalt way of thinking. And finally, Gaffney’s poem, “Home thoughts in a plane,” might be read with O’Neill’s article in mind, most ostensibly because it ruminates, in its
Paradox: A Gestalt Theory of Change for Organizations

Herb Stevenson, M.A., CDP, CPC

Abstract

Underlying the application of Gestalt theory to organization development, consulting, and/or coaching is an approach that Arnold Beisser, M.D., characterized in 1970 as the paradoxical theory of change, and Maurer (2003) later applied to organization development. This theory, which has become the foundation of Gestalt practice, flows from the primary premise that meaning is manifested through the differentiation, dissolution, and integration (i.e., a form of absorption) of polarities. This article seeks to provide an understanding of the theoretical concepts that underpin Gestalt change theory, which were implied by Perls, captured by Beisser, and expanded by Maurer with respect to Organizational Development.

References


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