Editorial

Contempt, Empathy, and Gestalt

Susan L. Fischer, Ph.D.

Contempt is the weapon of the weak and a defense against one’s own despised and unwanted feelings.

– Alice Duer Miller (1874-1942, woman’s suffrage activist, writer of satirical poems advocating woman suffrage)
  www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/a/alicedurm169985.html

Therefore, when I considered this carefully, the contempt which I had to fear because of the novelty and apparent absurdity of my view, nearly induced me to abandon utterly the work I had begun.

– Nicolaus Copernicus
  www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/n/nicolausco238361.html

Self-absorption in all its forms kills empathy, let alone compas-

1Not surprisingly, the inspiration for this editorial comes from Joseph Melnick and Sonia March Nevis’s co-authored article–minimalistically, yet powerfully, entitled “Contempt”– which is included in this issue of Gestalt Review.

Susan L. Fischer, Ph.D., is professor emerita of Spanish and Comparative Literature at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. She graduated from the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland’s Intensive Post-Graduate Program in Gestalt Methods in 1982 and later completed workshops organized by the Gestalt International Study Center. She has incorporated Gestalt perspectives into her teaching, as well as into some of her publications on seventeenth-century Spanish theatre. She is fluent in Spanish and French and now lives in Brookline (Boston), Massachusetts.

Photograph by Matthew Kamholtz, J.D.
sion. When we focus on ourselves, our world contracts as our problems and preoccupations loom large. But when we focus on others, our world expands. Our own problems drift to the periphery of the mind and so seem smaller, and we increase our capacity for connection—or compassionate action.

You know, there’s a lot of talk in this country about the federal deficit. But I think we should talk more about our empathy deficit—the ability to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes; to see the world through the eyes of those who are different from us—the child who’s hungry, the steelworker who’s been laid-off, the family who lost the entire life they built together when the storm came to town. When you think like this—when you choose to broaden your ambit of concern and with the plight of others, whether they are close friends or distant strangers—it becomes harder not to act; harder not to help.
– Barack Obama
www.wisdomquotes.com/topics/empathy

The foregoing representative quotations on the emotions of contempt and empathy, however diverse their themes and perspectives—from projective defensiveness to denial of novelty or difference in creative (scientific) thinking, on the one hand, and from interpersonal connection and contact to socio-political awareness and solidarity, on the other—inform, to greater or lesser degree, virtually all of the material contained in this issue of Gestalt Review.

In their article, pithily entitled “Contempt,” Joseph Melnick and Sonia March Nevis follow a pattern that has grown to be proverbial in their collaboration as writers, as commentator Isabel Fredericson underscores: they “become interested in a subject that is familiar, a commonplace part of our daily lives”—an expression of “powerful, everyday emotions”—and they go on “[to explore] its depth and importance, and even its implications for global peace.” Once they have described how contempt operates—the emotional and cognitive mechanisms that comprise it, the gestures it generates, the actions it sometimes produces—Melnick and Nevis discuss ways to work with it within a Gestalt framework, mainly on the level of intimate systems. Contempt is viewed “as a failed attempt to manage differences—differences primarily around values”; and “for contempt to flourish,” they assert, “empathy must
be minimal or nonexistent.” “Empathy,” they maintain, “must be present for contempt to soften and diminish.”

Figural for Rosie Burrows in her Commentary is the authors’ focus on the highly projective nature of contempt, to which she relates more globally as a Gestalt practitioner in Northern Ireland. She reminds us of the negative and physiological consequences of what she terms “transgenerational” contempt—of trauma that is in the body rather than in the event; and of the “confluence of trauma bonding” that creates the breeding ground for greater isolation and more negative projections vis-à-vis the other.

In her Commentary Chantelle Wyley, drawing on the discipline of social neuroscience, also discusses the physiological consequences of extended cycles of contempt. As a practitioner in South Africa, Wyley underscores from first-hand experience the need for the “competency” of empathy, as described in the Goleman-Boyatzis-McKee “model of emotionally intelligent leadership,” in order to achieve a stance of “respectful dialogue” (cf. Goleman, cited in block quotation above). By viewing the political posturing and power-play of the current South African ruling party through the “Melnick and Nevis lens of contempt,” Wyley speaks appreciatively of how—in the here and now—she has kept herself “from taking sides and heaping derision and contempt” on the identified “other side.”

Lynn Williams, in “Making Contact with the Self-Injurious Adolescent: Borderline Personality Disorder, Gestalt Therapy, and Dialectical Behavioral Therapy Interventions,” illustrates the ways in which core Gestalt theory overlaps with DBT principles—such as awareness, mindfulness, sensory body experience, emotion regulation, acceptance, and the client/therapist relationship as agents of change—to create an “integrative model” for working with these clients “based on awareness and acceptance and on support-related interventions.” Addressing, by implication, the fundamental notion that empathy “must be present for contempt to soften and diminish,” Williams emphasizes the need for practitioners (and families) to honor borderlines’ resistances and take a nonjudgmental stance, recognizing that they are “doing their best.”

In an incisive, if densely argued, article entitled “A Poetics of Practice: Organization Consulting from a Gestalt Perspective,” Robert Farrands grounds his perspective in the work of Kurt Lewin, Kurt Goldstein, and (especially) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, at the same time that he invokes the poetic Weltanschauung of Ruth Padel, Seamus Heaney, and Gerard Manley Hopkins, to posit a consulting method based on a creative model of “immersion, symbolization, and expression.” As commentator Edwin C. Nevis points out, Farrands’ paper illustrates an emergent body of “case writing,” in which “first-person sharing is interwoven with third-person observations of the client” in an effort “to articulate the phenomenology of living in a complex system.”
For Farrands, the case cited from the British National Health Service “supports and develops the idea of practitioner presence by setting it along systemic openness and the vulnerability this requires of the practitioner.” Figural, in fact, for Malcolm Parlett in his Commentary is this consultant’s empathic “creation a ‘relational field’” in respect of the client system. In a discussion of “five abilities” which he believes form a method of inquiry into learning and development in the Gestalt milieu, Parlett heightens Farrands’ own awareness of having “found [himself] with a feeling of tender regard for the commitment of the professionals”; for Parlett, such “deep respect” impacted and facilitated the practitioner’s ability to notice its lack within the client groups.

Joel Latner, in his Commentary, challenges one of Farrands’ motivating questions—“What claims to objective knowledge may be made in respect of complex systems?”—positing that Merleau-Ponty is arguing against (i.e., not embracing) the ideas of “naturalism and objectivism”; and concluding that, since we can only possess phenomenological knowledge, “what has previously been called objectivity and subjectivity are without meaning.” Farrands, in his Response, rises to this and other challenges emerging out of the Commentaries, endeavoring to clarify the hypothesized connection between his consulting theory, the work of Merleau-Ponty, and Gestalt theory.

Also included in this issue of *Gestalt Review* are: a book review by Peter Cole, and poems by Peter Wheelock Tarlton (“Mutant Message Down Under”) and the late Claire Dennery Stratford (“Letting Go”)—all of which work synergistically to complement or enhance one another or one of the articles, discussed above. In his critique of Daniel N. Stern’s book, *The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life* (2004), Cole highlights the ways in which the author “shares with contemporary Gestalt therapy a deep involvement with intersubjectivity (the ability to meet, mirror, and empathize with the other’s experience) and the interpersonal dimensions of development.”

These intersubjective thoughts provide a flourishing finish to this issue of *Gestalt Review*, which is devoted—holistically—to a heightening, at all levels of system, of the empathic response as an antidote to the contemptuous judgment. The words of two consummate film actresses are apposite here:

The greatest gift of human beings is that we have the power of empathy—we can all sense a mysterious connection to each other.

— Meryl Streep

www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/merystree383745.html

When you start to develop your powers of empathy and imagi-
nation, the whole world opens up to you.

– Susan Sarandon
www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/s/susansaran371309.html

Susan L. Fischer, Ph.D.
sfischer@bucknell.edu