Editorial

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IT IS NOT NEWS that the world is in big trouble. Whatever illusions and beliefs might have existed regarding the state of global health have quickly disappeared as a result of the shattering events of the past year. We are all struggling to find answers to immense questions. How can independent states and countries that have radically different cultures, values, and world views and who simply do not like each other learn to get along? Solutions seem increasingly elusive. More than ever we are faced with the knowledge of how very far apart we seem to be from each other, while at the same time realizing that our mutual interdependency has never been greater.

It is relatively easy to frame the world’s problems in Gestalt terms. This is because, professionally, we face these issues daily on a small scale. Many of us spend our time working with individuals or systems that are fixated on the past. Others deal with families that are polarized, trying to help them find commonalities. We teach couples to become interested in each other, to accept differences and to find value in them. When we work with groups, we teach them that there is no subsystem or part that is evil and another part that is good. Instead, our theory posits that good and evil exist in each of us and that growth and development come from making contact with what we least like to deal with. In practical terms, it means that we are continuously “talking with the enemy.”

On a global level, we know that each country or state must understand that you cannot destroy or leave out the parts you do not like. Furthermore, unless each entity gets something from the relationship, it is impossible to coalesce into an interdependent system. We know that this involves perceiving and understanding the needs for survival and development of all the elements. And, of course, we realize that no country can be regulated or excluded without its affecting us all in important and profound ways.

Our understanding of these issues rests on a number of fundamental Gestalt concepts such as the importance of context, creative adjustment,
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The applicability of our theory to large political organizations is addressed in this issue of *Gestalt Review* as we focus on the United Nations (UN), whose task is to provide a forum where countries that are in conflict can meet and, hopefully, resolve differences. As Edwin Nevis points out in his introduction, the UN is a venue where independent entities meet to achieve an outcome of concern to all involved. This type of organizational mission seems ideally suited for a Gestalt approach, especially given the increased complexity and unique boundary conditions of the UN.

Nevis discusses a number of areas necessary to attend to if we are to be successful in facilitating relationship building between large interdependent entities such as UN members. He sets the stage for the dialogue that follows by describing the unusual dilemmas faced by a Gestalt consultant working in a system like the UN, such as the complexity of intergroup and cultural issues and the greater need to build support with subgroups.

Raymond Saner and Lichia Yiu, in their article, “Porous Boundary and Power Politics: Contextual Constraints of Organization Development Change Projects in United Nations Organizations,” succeed in furthering our understanding of the issues involved in facilitation of change process at the UN. They introduce a new concept, “porous boundaries,” as a descriptive term to help us understand the unique resistance to change embedded in this critically important organization. They not only point out the dilemmas present in intervening, but rightly question whether the Gestalt approach is designed to deal with organizations like the UN that favor more traditional, political, hierarchical, and secretive values. They end by suggesting how to apply our approach to UN agencies.
Rob Farrands, in his response, takes issue with some of their assumptions concerning the nature of organizational consulting. He specifically addresses the kind of organizations that organizational development (OD) practitioners typically consult to and the form that it takes.

He also addresses the format of the Saner and Yiu article, reminding us that Gestalt therapy is an “experience-near” approach. He asks important questions. How do (should) OD practitioners describe what they do? Does objective language create a sense of scientific objectivity while minimizing subjective experience? He pleads for the power of rich subjective description for a more expressive way of knowing. He ends by challenging some of Saner and Yiu’s assumptions concerning how to intervene in this complex system.

Mark Newton, in his commentary, also pleads, much like Farrands, for more detail and more examples. He describes his experience in intervening in a large, stratified, complex organization and ends with a series of lessons he has learned as a Gestalt-oriented organizational development consultant.

In their response, Saner and Yiu go beyond addressing the questions raised by Farrands and Newton. They describe their Gestalt roots and outline OD theory and methods in detail. They broaden the discussion, further addressing such issues as how to make OD fit better with nonWestern realities by focusing on value dimensions from which to view organizations. They end by suggesting ways to utilize their analysis to effectively design interventions in the UN.

Given the world situation, it is imperative that we, as Gestaltists, learn to apply our methods and theory to organizations of this sort. Saner, Yiu, Farrands, Newton, and Nevis provide us with an opportunity to see how it can be done. They struggle to discover which Gestalt concepts work and which are less effective. Please take the time to fully explore their contributions.

“At the End of the Day: In Memory of Miriam Polster,” by Steve Zahm and Eva Gold, is a touching remembrance of Polster’s life. Framed through the eyes of her husband, Erv, and a number of friends and associates, this essay reflects many sides of Miriam, weaving back and forth between her personal and professional life. Miriam Polster, through her writings, teachings, training, and personal impact has left an invaluable mark on the field of Gestalt theory. Said simply, she made the Gestalt community a better one.

Gestalt therapy struggles not only in its application beyond the therapist’s room, but also within the therapeutic domain. It is not a secret that the therapeutic landscape has changed drastically within the last few years. As the frame has changed, so has the way of
evaluating therapeutic theories. At present, in order for approaches to have influence and validity, they must be supported by theory and have demonstrated research validation. This is why I am pleased to present our next two articles, “Revising the Treatment of Anxiety,” by Norman Shub, and “Effectiveness of Operationalized Gestalt Therapy Role-Playing in the Treatment of Phobic Behaviors,” by Mario Martinez. Both authors approach the issue of treatment and diagnosis, Shub via the application of Gestalt theory, and Martinez through research.

Shub’s article is, in fact, an important paper outlining his thoughts on development, an area that has been sorely in need of attention. After first developing and expanding such concepts as connection, conformation, and trust, he returns to his Gestalt roots. He outlines his views on the development of anxiety, emphasizing the role of negative introjects. He then presents a case study and ends by detailing his approach to dealing with these phenomena.

In his paper, Martinez tests the Gestalt assertion that phobic fears are projections that we connected to an external stimulus. What is extremely important about this study is that he is working with a real-life population with long-term phobic behaviors. This well-designed study results in some external support for a Gestalt-oriented treatment in dealing with this problem in a quick and cost-effective manner.

We end this issue of Gestalt Review with Back Pages, featuring four book reviews, including The Listening Hand by Ilana Rubenfeld, reviewed by Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb; Communing with Nature by John Swanson, reviewed by John Wymore; A Well-Lived Life: Essays in Gestalt Therapy by Sylvia Fleming Crocker, reviewed by Leo O. Harris; and Organizing Projects: From a Mechanical to an Organic Perspective by Lars Marmgren and Mats Ragnarrson, reviewed by Karen Moran. These books span the range of Gestalt therapy from a focus on the body and the environment to working with project management in organizations. Their topics demonstrate the widespread applicability and breadth of the Gestalt Approach.

References