EDITORIAL
Making the Learning Last

JOSEPH MELNICK, PH.D.

Change can be transitory or long lasting. That is why one of the goals of therapy and organizational consultation is to create positive change that endures.

The Gestalt approach has an array of powerful tools and strategies to heighten awareness and create change within the individual. But as we all know, the change that occurs in a therapist’s or consultant’s office is often unsustainable once clients return to their own surroundings.

Why doesn’t change last? The simple answer is that often the external environment does not provide enough support for the change to become an integrated part of who we are.

I would like to give two contrasting examples from my student days that helped shape my interest in the importance of broad and supporting contexts for sustainable change. Both experiences happened in 1967.

The first took place during my first sensitivity training or T-group. It was a profound experience in which intimate encounters and quick learnings occurred over and over again. The memory of how different I felt after that weekend is still clear 35 years later. At the end of that first workshop, I felt I was changed forever. To my surprise, my circle of colleagues and friends at home hardly noticed these changes, and even my own inner sense of the difference quickly faded.

The second experience involved visiting clients’ homes during my internship. Unfortunately, except for certain social work programs, providing therapy in the homes of clients seems to have gone the way of fondue pots and Nehru jackets. However, in the late 1960s, when the community mental health movement was in its heyday, home visits were common. Thus, the therapeutic encounter took place in the familiar environment of the client, rather than in that of the clinician.

Dr. Melnick, editor of Gestalt Review, has been practicing, teaching, and writing about Gestalt therapy for over 30 years.
I found that visiting individuals and families in their homes was almost always a profound experience. Our interactions seemed to be more three-dimensional, more vibrant, more real than office visits. Intimate moments were easier to create in the client’s home. In fact, they appeared to happen naturally. And my interventions seemed to attach more to the client system, resulting in an impact that transcended the moment and had a lasting effect. Furthermore, the setting of practical goals and the facilitation of ongoing familial and community support helped sustain the learning.

What conclusions did I draw from these two experiences? First, if the environment feels comfortable and familiar, the learning that occurs there has a greater chance of “sticking to one’s bones.” Second, if people in the environment have similar interests, goals, problems, and challenges, the support and connection mutually generated will help to sustain the learning. Last, a method of support for continued learning, even after the intervener withdraws and the immediate crisis lessens, is beneficial. Examples include homework, workbooks, prayer, meditation, journal writing, and aftercare groups.

In this issue of Gestalt Review we begin with Sara Hoover’s interview with Norman Shub, Director of the Gestalt Institute of Central Ohio, and Mike Rayden, the CEO and Chairman of Limited Too, a chain of 510 clothing stores for “tween” girls aged 9-12. In this interview, Shub and Rayden outline an exciting project in which Gestalt therapists will be invited to help facilitate learning groups to build self-esteem in pre-teen girls.

What excites me the most about this project is that it contains many of the elements necessary for sustainable change that I outlined above. Let me explain.

Twen girls are a population at high risk. Their sense of self is in flux and constantly changing. And like all youngsters, their development is mediated largely by their interpersonal relationships and their environment (McConville, in press). To have a positive impact, it is important that interventions occur in multiple levels of the environmental field.

The tween program, co-sponsored by the March of Dimes, will use a multi-modal approach involving group participation and self-exploration. Parents will be involved and will be given a parenting workbook. All sessions will be conducted in Limited Too stores.

In terms of design, it will utilize Gestalt-trained facilitators and a Gestalt methodology to maximize contact and connection. The population (female tweens) will be of a specific age and will share interests, thus creating identification and group support. Topics will include self-esteem and body image, subjects that are extremely relevant to many tween girls. The programs will be conducted at the Limited Too stores, an interesting and relevant environment to this age group. And last, workbooks will help carry these learnings into their home environment, and parental involvement will evolve into future support.
It is projected that this undertaking will reach more than 30,000 girls a year. It is a novel and creative experiment, grounded in the cooperation of three different cultures: Limited Too, a for-profit clothing store; the March of Dimes, a highly respected charitable organization; and the Gestalt community. (If you are interested in being part of the experiment, please refer to the advertisement in this issue.)

The remainder of our issue is filled with interesting and exciting articles. We are pleased to feature Jon Frew’s “Keeping the Spirit in the Organization: A Classroom as a Learning Community,” followed by commentaries from Alan Meara and Yaro Starak. This is an important and groundbreaking dialogue as all three writers grapple with the differences and similarities between groups and teams.

The Gestalt approach to groups historically has involved a therapeutic focus in which the goals consist of self-awareness and interpersonal learning. Group cohesion and connectedness are seen as vehicles necessary for the enhancement of individual growth, and the developmental model is borrowed from group development theory (Huckabay 1992, Kepner 1980). It incorporates phases and stages, concepts foreign to a Gestalt perspective. Also, because groups were usually conducted in retreat settings or therapists’ offices, the impact of the external environment was de-emphasized.

Frew, Meara, and Starak, all therapists, organizational consultants, trainers and educators, address the differences between groups and teams. In doing so, they expand Gestalt group theory to include organizations in which external goals and agendas are often what bring individuals together. Personal growth and the creation of intimacy are less central, and individuals must, at times, sub-optimize their own learning and development in order to achieve a common goal.

Our last two articles, “Gestalt Theory and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: The Irony and the Challenge,” by Arie Cohen, and “A Gestalt Perspective of Crisis Debriefing: Working in the Here and Now When the Here and Now is Unbearable,” by Ann Bauer and Sarah Toman, have tremendous relevance to our world, especially after the events of September 11, 2001. Both articles deal with trauma, and each presents theoretical, strategic and tactical perspectives utilizing a Gestalt frame of references. They have practical relevance to those of us who provide support for the victims of trauma.

BACK PAGES

Joel Latner, Ph.D., will be leaving our editorial board after this issue. Joel has served as an associate editor since the inception of Gestalt Review. He created and edited Back Pages and helped make it always a surprise, filled with essays, opinions, and dialogue. I wish him good luck and will miss him.
Elizabeth Revell, Ph.D., will be joining us as an associate editor, and will be taking over as editor of Back Pages. Most recently, Elizabeth has served as the editor of the Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy (AAGT) newsletter. I am pleased to welcome her aboard.

ELAINE KEPNER

I am sad to report the death of Elaine Kepner, Ph.D. Elaine was a strong supporter of *Gestalt Review* and an original member of our editorial board. She was a co-founder, faculty member and honorary fellow of the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, an *Emerita* member of National Training Laboratories, and a former faculty member of the Fielding Institute.

What stands out most to me about Elaine is her range of talents and interests. She was one of the first individuals to apply Gestalt concepts and principles to organizations and to family-based businesses. She was an accomplished theoretician and added significantly to our body of knowledge. Among her writings, two classics come to mind—“Gestalt Therapy: A Behavioristic Phenomenology” (1970, with Lois Brien), and “Gestalt Group Process” (1980), in which she integrated group developmental theory and group process approaches into a uniquely Gestalt perspective.

She was always her own woman, willing to speak her mind. She will be greatly missed by those of us who knew her and were touched by her creativity and special presence.

REFERENCES


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