EDITORIAL
The Later Years

JOSEPH MELNICK, PH.D.

Although Gestalt therapy has a well-articulated way of looking at process, be it a moment or a life span (The Cycle of Experience, Zinker, 1977), we have tended to undervalue the past in our theory and practice. We have been more interested in the first part of the cycle that focuses on sensation, awareness, action, and contact, and less interested in resolution, withdrawal and meaning making (Melnick and Nevis, 1998).

This emphasis is certainly consistent with much of Western culture, which is youth oriented, and drawn to action and new experience. Yet the world is changing, for we are living longer. The table below, drawn from the National Vital Statistics Report (2002), makes this point. Life expectancy from 1900 to 2000 has increased by nearly 30 years!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Life Expectancy</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>76.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>75.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>73.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>70.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>69.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>68.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>62.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>59.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>54.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>47.3</td>
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</tbody>
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We are faced with having to deal with a period of life, both individually and collectively, for which we have little experience and few models.

Dr. Melnick, editor of Gestalt Review, has been practicing, teaching, and writing about Gestalt therapy for over 30 years.
Said simply, we are on virgin turf. So how does one live well in the later years?

First, we need to affirm the Gestalt belief that all experience has no inherent value of good or bad. A good life involves embracing experience, no matter what it is, and learning from it. In order to appreciate “old age” we have to realize that the last part of life is as important and meaningful as the first part, and that the later years have tremendous power.

Second, it is necessary to understand that much of the uniqueness of the older years centers on the dimension of time. During most of our lives the future has a tremendous impact, taking up much of our interest as we figure out how we are going to learn, to live, to construct our lives. In older age, time is compressed—for the future is truncated. The last stage of life is lived primarily in the present and the past. In old age it is a mistake to dwell too closely on the future, for there is less of it.

Third, as we age, loss becomes a recurring figure. One is constantly faced with it—not just physical loss, such as sight, hearing, energy, and physical mobility, but also the regrets, the dreams not realized, the roads not taken. And of course, we must learn to bear the deaths of friends and family members.

This issue is exacerbated by Western culture’s negative view of loss. Despite this, it is critical to become as interested in loss as in gain, for we learn as much, and often more, from our losses than from our victories. It is imperative to realize that at every stage of life there is humor, anger, sadness, and joy, as well as grief.

It is important to remember that loss is a lively figure. Knowing this allows us to appreciate the freedom that not having a seemingly limitless future gives us. This reality diminishes anxiety, because we know that the future is mostly for others. We do not have to address it. More than ever, the future is in the present.

Last, one ages well by staying interested in present experience, one’s own and that of others. The ability to be curious does not naturally diminish when we are older. The content might shift; the areas of the cycle where we spend the majority of our time might change, but the process is the same. It is when there are breaks in this interest that psychological problems ensue, and psychotherapists and consultants are needed.

The lack of attention by Gestalt theorists to the later years has been reflected in a scarcity of writing on the subject. That is why I am pleased to feature an in-depth dialogue on aging in this issue of *Gestalt Review*. The lead articles are by Joseph Handlon, Ph.D., and Isabel Fredericson, Ph.D. They continue to deal creatively with their later years by writing together and presenting their learnings to the world. Like some of the commentators, you may be critical of parts of their content, but their process for dealing with the later years should serve as an inspiration to us all.
Our Current Issue

Handlon’s and Fredericson’s article, “The Later Years from a Gestalt Systems/Field Perspective,” is divided into two parts—conceptual background and therapeutic considerations. It is followed by commentaries by Jennifer Andrews, Ph.D., and David Clark, Ph.D.; Donna DeMuth, LCSW; and Katherine Greenleaf, J.D. This series of papers address important questions. Why do some people age well and others do not? Why is “old” a bad word? How does aging affect such issues as spirituality? What about individual differences in the later years? How do negative cultural stereotypes affect the self-image of the elderly?

This dialogue is rich in content and wisdom. I believe that it will inspire you to look at aging in new ways, whether you are young or old.

A year ago, at our annual meeting, the associate editors of Gestalt Review decided to invite individuals who have contributed significantly to the advancement of the Gestalt approach to write about a topic of their choice. Our next two articles are responses to invitations given to Eleanor O’Leary, Ph.D., and Sonia March Nevis, Ph.D. It is not surprising that both have chosen to write with colleagues, for both their illustrious careers have involved a collaborative attitude.

Among her many contributions to the Gestalt approach, Dr. O’Leary is responsible for creating, in 1984, the long running master’s degree program in Gestalt therapy at the University College of Cork, Ireland. Her tireless efforts have resulted in an excellent program filled with enthusiastic students and an outstanding curriculum. She and her colleague, David O’Sullivan, D.Phil., have chosen to write about the development of Gestalt therapy in Ireland. For many, our sense of the history of Gestalt therapy has focused on its growth within the United States. I am sure that you will be as fascinated as I was to read about “Models of Training in Gestalt Therapy in Ireland.”

Dr. Nevis has spent much of her career focusing on the topic of intimacy. Like O’Leary, her contribution has not been limited to teaching and writing, but in creating a program that provides both training and inspiration to students. Her efforts have resulted in the Center for Intimate Studies, first at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland and, more recently, at the Gestalt International Study Center on Cape Cod. It has been my privilege to have been first a student and then a colleague of hers for many years. She has chosen to write about “Connecting Strategic and Intimate Interactions: The Need for Balance” with Stephanie Backman, MSSA, and Edwin Nevis, Ph.D. This article bridges the gap between intimacy, a necessity for connection and contact, and strategy, a necessity for the achievement of goals and the completion of work.

Our last article is “Reaction Formation: An Integral Gestalt Approach to Fights and Conflicts” by Reinhard Fuhr, Ph.D., and Martina Gremmler-
Fuhr, M.A. As I write this editorial, we are in the midst of the Iraqi war. As we struggle to manage conflict and disputes at every level, including a global one, the Fuhrs present their insights as to the origins and management of conflict. Todd Burley, Ph.D., the action editor for this article, writes that “Contact functions and dialogue are areas of Gestalt theory that have been relatively static for many years with little in the way of progress in our understanding or new clinically applicable concepts. This article opens new territory by expanding our understanding of processes occurring at the internal and interpersonal contact boundaries as well as providing practical possibilities for intervention in the dialogue process.”

Back Pages features Katia Hatzilakiov’s review of Chronic Sorrow (2002) by Susan Roos. In this personal response, Hatzilakou describes her relationship to the book. She talks to it, fights with it, eventually makes contact and learns from her experience.

The importance of the Gestalt approach has never been so obvious to me as I look over this issue. Aging, loss, conflict, intimacy, education, sorrow—these are the things of which life is composed. To grapple with these phenomena is often not easy, but it is necessary. To approach all aspects of life with liveliness and interest is fundamental to the Gestalt approach, and to a life well and fully lived at all ages and stages.

REFERENCES


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1A notable exception is the article by Woldt and Stein (1997)