

Editorial

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THESSALONIKI, GREECE

Having just returned from the fourth European Association for Gestalt Therapy (EAGT) Writers' Conference in Thessaloniki, Greece, I am still trying to absorb the contrasts between the old and new that permeate this ancient city, founded in 315 B.C. Thessaloniki is the second largest city in Greece and one of the most ancient in all of Europe. Its founder, Cassandros, king of Macedonia, named it after his wife, the sister of Alexander the Great.

During a half-day break in the middle of the conference, our hostesses, Katia Hatzilakou and Antonia Konstantinidou, arranged for us to visit Vergina, where the burial sites of a number of Greek nobility were discovered in the 1970s. Among them is the crypt of Philippe, the father of Alexander the Great! As we drove out of the city, we could see the silhouette of Mount Olympus peaking over the horizon. I was instantly transported back to high school, and feeling a little guilty for not having paid more attention to ancient history.

The past does not exist only in museums and archeological sites; it heavily influences the present-day values and norms of contemporary Greek society. As I learned from my hosts, many young adults feel torn between the powerful introjects to obey and further their parents' traditional marriage-related expectations, lifestyle, and religion—no matter how ill-informed or life-diminishing—and their wishes to follow their own desires.



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The power of the past in this thriving city can be seen in even more concrete ways. Although the major roadways are congested, attempts to build an underground subway system have proved unsuccessful. It seems that whenever they start to dig, a new archeological site is discovered, prohibiting efforts at modernization.

Yet there is also much newness in this thriving city of 1,250,000 inhabitants. It is the home of the University of Thessaloniki, founded in 1925, the largest university in Greece, with more than 70,000 students. The city is bustling with energy. Young people are everywhere, filling up the coffee shops, restaurants, and bars.

The tension between the old and the new, the past and the present, is one of the basic dynamics of life. It is also a template that can be used to view many phenomena. This relationship between old and new is important in viewing the world of Gestalt, both in terms of culture and theory.

With respect to theory, we believe that there is a "correct" tension between figure and ground that, when present, results in a lively figure, and allows for the organism (individual, family, culture, organization, etc.) to develop with grace. If the pull of the old is too strong, then the organism is backward-leaning, wedded to the past, and unable to live in the present. If the past is shallow or undervalued, then action may be ungrounded and unsupported.

Reviewing the history of Gestalt therapy as a social movement, I believe that we started out "figure bound," too interested in the present moment, and not enough concerned with its relationship to a rich therapeutic, cultural, and societal past.¹ Now, there is much more interest by Gestalt practitioners in the importance of ground.

What is taking place in Thessaloniki reflects not only the new in Greek society, but also in the Gestalt approach. Four Greek women, Gianna Giarmarelou, Despina Balliou, Katia Hatzilakou, and Antonia Konstantinidou, founded the Gestalt Foundation, the institute that hosted our conference six years ago. They have training programs in Thessaloniki and Athens that serve 70 students.

When I arrived for the conference, they had just completed their annual four-day conference entitled "The Experience of Self: Sex, Identity and Character," attended by 140 individuals. In addition to their regular staff, they had two senior Gestalt practitioners from Holland, Harm Siemens and Dick Lompa, as well as Christine Stevens from England, Peter Schultess from Switzerland, and Nurith Levi from Israel participating to reinforce multiple perspectives.

I met some of their students at the Writers' Conference and was impressed by their knowledge of Gestalt theory, which ranged from Perls, Hefferline and Goodman to the more contemporary writings found in

¹ This was not the case with our original theory, which painstakingly incorporated the insights of Freud, Reich, Rank, and many others. For example, see Ginger, this issue.

the latest journals and books. I was especially excited by their commitment to applying Gestalt theory outside the traditional therapy setting. For example, they are working and doing research in the local YWCA with poor young women, as well as doing action research with Alzheimer's and cancer patients.

So, in Thessaloniki, Greece, I found a wonderful example of a community that has found a way to incorporate the past while exploring new and exciting avenues. They show us that we must not hold on too tightly to the old, nor embrace the new too readily. By honoring both and through measure and practice, we can create a well-grounded and growing theory and community.

OUR CURRENT ISSUE

Our current issue features two important case studies. A case study focuses on the lively moment in which experience is new and developing, and then involves placing the experience into a larger theoretical context. It is this back and forth movement between the "now" and theory that creates this captivating form of writing.

The first, an organizational case, is Seán Gaffney's "Gestalt at Work: A Gestalt Organization and Systems Dynamics Case Study." Gaffney describes his work with an organization that provides a range of support services for individuals with HIV and AIDS. He looks into the heart of an organization with laudable values, struggling to adjust to changing times and contexts. As he describes his interventions, he moves back and forth between figure and ground, between the "doings"—that is, the living, ongoing work, and the theory and concepts that inform his interventions. This article is an outstanding example of the integration of the old and the new, of Gestalt work with new populations and new dilemmas that remains faithful to our Gestalt theory.

The article is preceded by an introduction by Edwin Nevis in which he sets a contextual frame for this work and the commentaries by Chantelle Wyley and Birgit Niebuhr that follow Gaffney's article. Finally, Gaffney responds to all three authors.

Our second article, Nancy Amendt-Lyon's "Dealing With Tinnitus," is a pioneering effort in applying a case study approach to a disorder commonly viewed as a physical illness and usually treated from a medical, not psychotherapeutic, perspective. She moves back and forth between figure and ground, between the presenting problem, tinnitus, and the larger field. She focuses on her client's subjective experience of the disorder, helping her to explore the personal meaning of the experience based on the fundamental Gestalt concepts of contact and support. Amendt-Lyon describes in clear detail her client's relationship with tinnitus as a process of creative adjustment. As she says, "symptoms express a person's uniqueness and one's own creative self" (p. 313).

The next article is "Conflict, Emotions and Appreciation of Differences," by Judith R. Brown. As Brown points out, conflict is inherent in life and, as we know, often leads to destruction and death. After first defining this concept intrapsychically, interpersonally, and culturally, she describes how emotions such as shame, humiliation, contempt, and fear fuel the negativity that often accompanies conflict. She then describes how empathy can support the appreciation of differences, leading to connection and growth. She ends by describing a practical program based on Gestalt principles that can increase dialogue and connection, and bridge differences.

I found the article "Gestalt Groups Revisited: A Phenomenological Approach" by Mark Fairfield to be especially well reasoned. As Fairfield points out, Gestalt theories of group development have been borrowed primarily from traditional systems theories, describing normative stages and predictable cycles. While these templates provide a structure for the therapist and consultant, they also diminish possibilities for newness and creativity. As a result, the leader may often miss important phenomena occurring in the life of the group. Fairfield presents a comprehensive approach to group development that is field based and phenomenologically grounded. He makes a convincing argument that this approach results in the inclusion of more diverse perspectives and greater creativity.

Our last featured article is Serge Ginger's "Sandor Ferenczi, The 'Grandfather of Gestalt Therapy.'" In this fascinating essay, Ginger takes us into the personal and professional life of Ferenczi, describing his many contributions to the therapeutic field. While not having a direct personal relationship with the early Gestalt therapists, Ferenczi's work foreshadows much of what has become basic to our Gestalt theory. More specifically, Ginger describes Ferenczi's relationship with Freud, and his views on a wide range of topics such as sexuality, homosexuality, and countertransference.

BACK PAGES

As usual, we conclude this issue of *Gestalt Review* with Back Pages. It includes Michael Clemmens' review of Helga Matzko's DVD and manual, "A Synthesis of Dialectical Behavior Therapy and Therapeutic Community Treatment for Addiction/Mental Health Troubled Clients," Sonia Nevis's review of Sara Corse's *Cradled All The While: The Unexpected Gifts of a Mother's Death*, and the videotape "Singular Views on Gestalt Therapy," produced by the Paris School of Gestalt (École Parisienne de Gestalt), reviewed by James Weaver.

We end with a highly personal memorial of Lars Norberg, one of the founders of the Gestalt Academy of Scandinavia (see Melnick, 2001 for an interview with Norberg and his co-founders) and a pioneer in the application of the Gestalt approach to organizations, by his good friend and colleague, Barbro Curman.

R E F E R E N C E

Melnick, J. (2001). The Gestalt Academy after 25 years: An interview with the founders. *Gestalt Review*, 5(1):4-10.