Editorial

Ever-Emergent, Ever-Changing Reality:
The Gestalt Context

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The title of this editorial is inspired by a phrase appearing in Frank Rubenfeld’s short reflection, “Metaphors, Uncertainty, Reality, and Gestalt,” in which he notes that identifying with Gestalt practice and theory enables him to “swim in the ocean of reality,” in effect, an “ocean of uncertainty” surrounded by “islands of certitude (which themselves change shape over time).” It is with this mindset that I seek to acquaint you, our readers, with the content of this issue of Gestalt Review, consisting of three disparate articles and a trio of essays that do not so much “review” as engage with books and a training video.

Bruce Kenofer, in “Developing Gestalt Case Conceptualization,” identifies straightaway the paradox inherent in considering case conceptualization from a Gestalt therapy perspective, insofar as “the very notion of considering a person as a ‘case’ appears to be in conflict with the principle of authentic

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relating." He then goes on to articulate a rationale for the approach, to offer some cautions with respect to its use, to elaborate a clear developmental framework of case conceptualization, and to provide an illustration of the application of the principles to a specific situation. However well the paper is argued, its “island of certitude” may well disconcert those readers for whom the notion of case conceptualization flies in the face of phenomenological exploration and emergent dialogue, and for whom it is at variance with the field theory of Gestalt therapy and the relational emphasis attached to that theory in recent years.

If, at first glance, Kenofer’s article appears to serve as a practical guide for beginning Gestalt therapists, Elinor Greenberg’s contribution, “Goals and the Borderline Client: A Gestalt Therapy Approach,” is in fact a template for practitioners. She details a simple method involving the principal of figure/ground formation, which therapists can use to help clients who have made Borderline Personality Adaptations to identify realistic steps toward their goals, and to anticipate and overcome obstacles. Greenberg provides framed clinical examples that demonstrate how to use this method, discusses commonly encountered problems, and suggests possible solutions. All the while that the client swims in an “ocean of uncertainty,” the therapist must represent an “island of certitude” (Rubenfeld) however provisionally, and “be what the client cannot be: stable, reliable, focused, realistic, and persistent.”

The paper by Cameron Plagens, entitled “The Gestalt Model of Evolutionary Creative Process” (GMECP), seeks to reconceptualize the original Gestalt Cycle of Experience (COE) in order to support “spiritual self-awareness and access to a spiritual intelligence” not often addressed directly in Gestalt practice. The GMECP incorporates the concepts of the Heart Center, Pre-Sense, and Void and reframes the phase of Withdrawal as Pre-Closure. If, for Plagens, the original Gestalt model of COE “remains a powerful representation of organic human processes related to wants and needs,” the GMECP is a “tool of existential and experiential inquiry that uses transformative spiritual awareness to develop alternate conceptual and perceptual ways of centering the Self, building meaningful connections between Self and Other, and sustaining wholeness in an era of exponential manufactured change”—and of uncertainty that is the hallmark of the 21st century.

Sarah Fallon’s detailed review of Ruella Frank’s training video for psychotherapists, entitled Developmental Somatic Psychotherapy, is as informative of Fallon’s envisioned application of the approach to her clinical work with the British National Health Service, as it is of Frank’s identification of six stages of development (Yielding, Pushing, Reaching, Grasping, Pulling, and Releasing) and the ensuing analysis of them. In each of these fundamental movements, Frank focuses on the “dance” between baby
and carer, or client and therapist, and explores the interplay between the two, creating a relational and movement-oriented psychotherapy within a contemporary Gestalt therapy framework. The DVD format allows for the direct witnessing of what would normally be presented indirectly through anecdote or vignette, especially since there is no “content” to attend to as in more traditional psychotherapy sessions. The training video therefore invites viewers, not only to reflect upon their own responses to what materializes and compare them with Frank’s interventions, but also to think on how the somatic approach might in fact extend aspects of their own practice.

If the format of film allowed Fallon to observe Frank’s work with ease, and sense both her theoretical and practical approach and her presence as a therapist, the *seven-hundred page* tome—*Gestalt Therapy in Clinical Practice: From Psychopathology to the Aesthetics of Contact*, edited by Gianni Francesetti, Michela Gecele, and Jan Roubal—presented a rather daunting task for its two reviewers, Lynne Jacobs and Joel Latner. In her pithy response, Jacobs underscores the editors’ dual vision for the book: first, that “psychopathology is a cocreative phenomenon of the field [emerging] at the contact boundary and can be transformed in the process of contact”; and second, that “this transformation is aesthetic [since] it is perceived by our senses, evaluated by aesthetic intrinsic criteria, and can even create beauty” (Francesetti *et al*., p. 18). One feature of the book especially stands out for Jacobs: the commentary on content that follows each chapter, which not only encourages critical thinking but also shows that “Gestalt therapy is not monolithic, and that there is room for vigorous intelligent—as opposed to polemical—discussions of differences in our Gestalt therapy perspectives.”

Latner, in a reflective review essay entitled “Gestalt Therapy in the 21st Century,” states that *Gestalt Therapy in Clinical Practice* “summarizes the thinking and methods of over four dozen mostly European Gestalt therapists in more than three dozen essays, providing a view of Gestalt thinking and activity in areas as various as research, trauma, violence, old age, hysteria, dementia, bulimia, and psychopathology, among many others.” Opining that it is impossible for a review to do justice to the seven hundred-page volume, Latner opts to consider its contribution “in terms of Gestalt therapy as the latter has changed.” Presenting a sort of “specialized historiography, an elaboration of some of the particulars in a collective history,” he focuses primarily on Fritz Perls’s legacy and Isadore From’s impact on that legacy. He concludes that Gestalt Therapy in Clinical Practice is “discordant” with what he had learned of Gestalt therapy’s earlier principles and practice starting in 1963; the “fundamental disconnect” between then and now, he says, is linked to the ways in which the therapy has been modified, so as to “become acceptable to those who codify psychological approaches.” Finally, for Latner,
the book’s practical value is as a “compendium of current practice. . . a record of what Gestalt therapy has become after fifty years.”

One of Susan Roos’s quibbles with Peter Philippson’s book, *The Emergent Self: An Existential Gestalt Approach*, concerns the way in which the author presents his thinking, for example, on existential contemplation and angst, “as a universal ‘truth’ and ‘fact.’” “I would have no uneasiness about his reasonings about life and death, were it not for his style of presentation as the way and as fact about existence and the workings of the universe,” Roos writes in her review essay (emphasis in original). She voices her discomfiture with the book’s “sweeping generalizations” that “invite inquiry and are frightening”; hence, she wonders, more broadly, “if contacting as described by Philippson is the only way the self emerges” (emphasis in original). For Roos, there appears to be “no real clarity about singularity versus multiple avenues for self-emergence” in Philippson’s presentation. “Are there not multiple ways and contexts in which the self can emerge and become more choiceful?” she queries. Roos concludes with a number of suggestions for the author to consider, should he ever undertake to write a second edition of the book in order to answer questions and clarify uncertain issues introduced in this present version.

Roos, in grappling with questions of singularity versus multiple avenues of viewing, with different contexts in which a subject matter can become choiceful, and with a “both/and” perspective in regard to the dynamic dimensions of an issue, brings us full circle to one of the reasons for Rubenfeld’s identification with Gestalt theory and practice, as cited above. Gestalt practice and theory, at the end of the day, has the capacity to enable one to float and swim in the ocean of uncertainty that is reality—ever-emergent and ever-changing. That is it in a nutshell, is it not?

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