Living in the 21st Century: A Gestalt Therapist’s Search for a New Paradigm

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ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to connect some of the basic theoretical assumptions of Gestalt theory with the practice of living in the 21st century against a background of seemingly uncontrollable, violent sectarian/tribal conflict. Gestalt theory is located within a postmodern epistemology whose strengths are critically explored, as well as the tendency toward a skepticism that can deteriorate into a nihilistic impotence. A “new” paradigm of community, compatible with Gestalt theory, is suggested: “You are, therefore, I am.” This “new” paradigm arguably has been gathering momentum for at least seventy years. While offering an alternative vision of hope, it also requires a challenging reflection on personal responsibility and a commitment to community.

Introduction

In early September 2006, just after the ceasefire in the Lebanon, I traveled to Israel. The European Association for Gestalt Therapy (hereafter EAGT) had planned a project in Israel to support dialogue among interested professionals from the Jewish, Israeli Arab, and Palestinian communities. The project was postponed because of the war but I felt drawn to go anyway. Joanna Hewitt Taylor, Gestalt Course Leader at

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the Scarborough Psychotherapy Training Institute, also decided to go to Israel, as did Daan van Baalen, External Relations Officer for EAGT, and Peter Schulthess, Training Standards Officer for EAGT. Four people from The Netherlands and one person from Germany also decided to make the journey. Nurith Levy, Chair of the Israeli Gestalt Association, responded with her characteristic enthusiasm and quiet determination and tried to arrange a gathering of people. With support from her friend Idit and others, Nurith rented a room at a college of education in Tel Aviv and we waited. Gradually the room filled with forty people—Jew, Israeli Arab, and a Palestinian Arab who had been in prison for four years.

Some people present thought those of us from Western Europe had come to offer advice, so we explained that on the contrary, we were here to learn, listen, and engage in dialogue.

We reflected on what Gestalt theory might contribute to the challenge of reconciliation and how the conflict in the Middle East might, in turn, affect the evolution of Gestalt theory and practice. We were inspired by reports of local and courageous endeavors toward reconciliation between Jew and Arab, to which I shall return later.

The World Outside the Therapy Room

Violent conflict is an epidemic for the human species or perhaps an epidemic of the human species. We appear no further along in constraining the scale and magnitude of violence, except that nowadays, with our more sophisticated weaponry, we have learned to commit violence with greater clinical precision and premeditation than ever before.

The world of the therapy room can no longer ignore the world outside the therapy room, which impinges directly or indirectly on therapist and client alike. However, psychotherapy in general has not evolved its theory and practice to address the social, cultural, and political dimensions of living. We are too preoccupied with the intrapsychic and attend only to the interpersonal insofar as it relates to the therapist-client dyad.

Perhaps we feel the task is too overwhelming? However, I believe that if we attend more closely to the values underpinning psychotherapy theory and critically examine the philosophical premises on which our theory is based, we might inform and evolve our methods and practices to take more seriously the wider “field” in which we live. Thus, in addition to our being a “psychotherapist with a social conscience,” we might better integrate social awareness and social action into psychotherapy theory and practice.

Regrettably, psychotherapists rarely appear to reflect on or question the philosophical assumptions underlying their theories, models and approaches (Mace, 1999). The education and training of psychotherapists need to take more responsibility for this relative lack of critique. As Downing writes, “while some doubts are tolerated by a training program, challenges to the core assumption of the approach are usually discouraged, dismissed or treated as resistance. A trainee learns rather quickly that there

are ways of experiencing, behaving, and verbalizing which receive praise and reward from the mentors, and those that are greeted with raised eyebrows, silence, or even rebuke” (Downing, 2000, p. 39).

Frank and Frank (1991) suggest that belief is central to an understanding and application of any psychotherapeutic approach, but while therapeutic progress requires sufficient belief in the therapeutic method on the part of both therapist and client, I agree with Downing that it is dangerous when those beliefs are held as absolute truths rather than as temporary and open to critique (Downing, 2000). There is also a sense that when people have invested large amounts of time and money in training in a particular approach, it may be difficult to critically challenge that allegiance.

Sophie Freud, in a public lecture, criticized her grandfather, Sigmund Freud, together with Carl Jung as “false prophets” by encouraging dependency and uncritical adherence among their “disciples” (Sophie Freud, 2002).

Such dependency is not confined to classical psychoanalysis. Leaders and teachers in all schools of psychotherapy, including Gestalt therapy, need to be mindful of what is being modeled to trainees and take time to critically reflect on our own narcissistic tendencies.

Sophie Freud urged her audience to relate to leaders in the psychotherapy profession as “brothers and sisters” rather than “fathers and mothers.” This attitude of deference to the “parents” in the psychotherapy profession is more reminiscent of the age of antiquity than of 21st-century postmodernity.

So, I shall repeat my premise that Gestalt therapy needs to critically explore its values and philosophies, to more adequately inform and evolve its practice and respond to the challenge to pay better attention to the socio-cultural and political dimension of human existence, especially the challenge of the epidemic of violent conflict as a means of settling disputes. In this paper I hope to make a small contribution to this challenge.

**New Lamps for Old**

Without even a general knowledge of the philosophical bases of Gestalt, it is impossible to adequately critique Gestalt theory or the values conveyed in the clinical application of Gestalt therapy. It is absurd and dangerous to assume that a Gestalt therapist can suspend her/his values, which are always implicit and sometime explicit in her/his behavior and attitudes during the therapy hour.

So what are the philosophical bases of Gestalt therapy? What values do we convey to our clients, directly or indirectly? In order to fully appreciate contemporary philosophical influences on Gestalt psychotherapy, it is important to first understand the historical context out of which current philosophical ideas have emerged. Someone once said, “Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”

In the history of Western philosophy, it is possible to distinguish three distinct paradigms or world views—Classical, Modern (or Age of Enlightenment), and Postmodern. Kuhn (1962) introduced us to the idea of paradigms, which are a way of looking at
ourselves and the world that give meaning to our lives and shape an entire cultural age. A paradigm shift/change requires new theories and new assumptions that are contrary to and incompatible with prevailing theories, and that bring about major changes in what is considered worthy of consideration for inquiry and inclusion in the field of study.

I believe there is evidence of a new paradigm which has been emerging somewhat sporadically and randomly over the past seventy years or so, which is gradually gathering momentum and taking shape, and offering the possibility of a new perspective on human community. This new paradigm may provide the basis for an effective challenge to the paradigm of violence—one that believes in resolving a problem by removing the problem, violently if necessary.

But before proceeding with the new paradigm, let us remind ourselves of where we have come from: the ground out of which contemporary society has emerged.

The Classical Age culminated in Greece (429-347BCE) with the Platonic notion that all reality was based on Ideals and Forms which transcended human reason. Truth was considered universal because it was grounded in universal forms such as beauty, goodness, justice, and so on. Such forms were metaphysical, and human knowledge was contingent on the existence of these forms. Within the Jewish and Christian traditions, this was manifest in the notion of God as creator and everything, including human beings, were contingent upon God. Faith was a form of knowledge, revealed knowledge. Truth was universal because it was grounded in an eternal and external creator: God is, therefore I am.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Modern Age, or Age of Enlightenment, moved knowledge beyond superstition and religious dogma and instead put its trust in the power of reason. Observation, calculation, checking results, deducing conclusions, testing ideas, developing theories were all made possible by new technology such as the telescope and the prism. In the West, people began to move out of the prison of dogma and fear of divine punishment. These experimental methods moved perception and understanding away from a basis in blind faith to one in observed fact. A process of de-centering the universe began. This was a paradigm shift of immense proportion, from a theocentric to a ratio-centric way of thinking. The universe was rational and could be understood by reason. Truth was held as universal because human beings were rational. Descartes (1596-1650) epitomized this shift from dogma to reason with his famous statement: “I think, therefore I am.”

Now, in the so-called postmodern age and after the end of the Great War of 1914-1918 (the “war to end all wars”), the Second World War, and contemporary weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), we appear to have lost belief in emancipation and progress through knowledge, reason, and scientific research (Kvale, 1992). Personal understanding and subjectivity give meaning today while objectivity is viewed with skepticism. According to Rosen, “knowledge and meaning are constructed and reconstructed over time and within the social matrix. They do not constitute universal and immutable essences or objective truths existing for all times and cultures” (Rosen, 1996, p. 20). The essential reality of nature is no longer separate and complete in a way allows it to be examined objectively and from the outside. This is a problem that quantitative
researchers appear not to have addressed, instead clinging ever more tightly to an illusion of objectivity. Contemporary psychology and medicine are firmly embedded in a modernist paradigm that first emerged more than 300 years ago.

**The Challenge of Postmodernism**

From a 21st century, postmodern perspective, there is no single, universal, privileged, accurate, truthful, and secure way of understanding anything, especially people! I agree with Loewenthal who writes, “Postmodernism blows the whistle on scientific intellectualism as one more form of Victorian morality” (Loewenthal, 1996). The general tone of postmodernism is curious, confused, pluralist, fragmentary, and open-ended. Tanesini believes that the idea of the postmodern expresses a widespread loss of faith in big ideals and theories (Tanesini, 1999). Lyotard describes the postmodern as “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard, 1996). In the postmodern age, “It is no longer possible for psychotherapists to “intentionally or unintentionally don the mantle of science through the seemingly scientific nature of their theoretical language, their therapeutic methods, or the locale of their practice” (Downing, 2000, p. 237).

The postmodern constructivist paradigm is based on a relativist ontology (multiple realities), a subjectivist epistemology (therapist and client co-create meaning), and a naturalistic (in the natural world) set of methodologies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The philosophical bases of Gestalt psychotherapy include phenomenology, field theory, and holism which are clearly postmodern epistemologies. From the phenomenological perspective, human behavior is seen as determined by personal experience rather than by an external objective reality (Cohen & Manion, 1994). The phenomenological method of inquiry honors the importance of subjective experience as a valid source of knowledge. Emphasis is placed on direct experience and engagement, “the most significant understandings that I have come to I have not achieved from books or others, but initially, at least, from my direct perceptions ... observations, and intuitions” (C. Moustakis, 1994, p. 41). Phenomenology is in turn compatible with field theory.

Field theory, according to Lewin (1952), is a way of looking at the “total situation,” which has been described as the organized, interconnected, interdependent, interactive nature of human phenomena” (Parlett, 1991). In this context, what the field produces is viewed as having intrinsic meaning and value in itself. An experience is intimately connected with the current field conditions and cannot be understood in isolation. This underpins the importance of a sensitivity to the context of the client’s life, including life outside the therapy room. The Gestalt notion of figure and ground is helpful in discerning on what, out of the totality of experience, to focus attention. At any point in our experience, certain needs will take priority and become figural while others will remain in the ground of our experience. Attending to what is figural helps us avoid being overwhelmed by all that is possible in the ground. In focusing on the totality of experience at any given moment, field theory is compatible with holism.

Holism maintains that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. From the holistic perspective, nothing is deliberately ignored. Observation of the happenings in
Holistic observation is therefore not simply “looking,” but rather looking mindfully and in depth. The holistic process offers active involved observation in all of one’s being, including cognition, sensation, and emotion. One attempts to bring the whole of oneself to what is figural in the whole of one’s engagement with the world. This may be viewed as the interface between the “dialectical-intrapsychic” and the “dialogical-interpersonal” level of experience in the context of a person’s total experience (Hycner, 1991, p. 74).

The epistemological bases of Gestalt psychotherapy outlined above of course are interrelated and mutually supporting. Together they underpin the theory and method of Gestalt psychotherapy as well as provide the foundation for the values of Gestalt psychotherapy. In my opinion, the philosophy, theory, and values of Gestalt psychotherapy need to be consistent and explicit so that they can be accessible to critique.

Twenty-first Century postmodernism, by challenging the foundations of what we know and how we know what we think we know, “demystifies the great narrative of modernism” (Gergen, 1992, p. 28). It encourages inquiry and questioning of all phenomena, and is supportive of the notion of the Gestalt psychotherapist as reflexive practitioner engaged in an ongoing process of inquiry and self-questioning.

Critique of Postmodernism

However, the postmodern paradigm has major problems, for while absolute truth is neither as absolute nor as true as the modernist paradigm would have us believe, the opposite polarity— that truth is indistinguishable from opinion— means that “nothing is real, nothing is true and nothing is important” (Holland, 2000, p. 3).

And this sums up the postmodern perspective: Nothing is real, nothing is true, and nothing (I am) is important.

According to Holland, modern skepticism as expressed, for example, in the writings of Jacques Derrida, does not attempt to cultivate a new philosophy of life, but rather to critique the theories and prejudices of others. But if we take everything apart, then on what authority do you judge anything? “Postmodern philosophy at its worst, presumes no authority at all except to claim with authority that there are no authorities” (Holland, 2000, p. 365). I have considerable sympathy with Holland when he concludes that, “neither the simplicity of grand narratives (modernism) or skepticism (postmodernism) deal with the complexities, inconsistencies and paradoxes of real life” (Holland, 2000, p. 360).

We need to look elsewhere if we are to find a means to escape the contemporary predicament of blind conviction or uncertainty and nihilism. But where might we look, and how (Lawson, 2001, p. xxxvii)? How can we avoid our assumptions becoming reified in dogma and at the same time avoid the ultimate impotence of unyielding skepticism (Downing, 2000)?

Some seek to establish a “middle ground” between the nihilism of deconstruction and the naïvete of modernism, based on pragmatism. For example, Black and Holford maintain that from a postmodern perspective, what is important is not whether
something is right or wrong, true or false, but whether it works (Black and Holford, 1999). In a similar vein, Polkinghorne writes, “One does not ask if a knowledge claim is an accurate depiction of the real—is it true? One asks, rather, does acting on this knowledge claim produce successful results?” (Polkinghorne, 1992, p. 151). However, pragmatism is too narrowly focused on the immediate situation. It is a form of situation ethics that “dies the death of a thousand qualifications” when one attempts to apply it to other and different situations.

**Paradox and Possibility**

So, where else shall we look? A potential way through this demise is to consider the Gestalt notion of viewing polarities from a paradoxical rather than an oppositional perspective. I agree with Bernstein that there is an intrinsic relationship between absolutism and nihilism in that either polarity, in the extreme, obscures the other and is liable to become dogmatic (Bernstein, 1992). Perls (Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman, 1951/94) believed that polarities were dialectical, forming two ends of one continuum (Clarkson & Mackewn, 1993). You cannot have one without the other; for example, good/bad, right/wrong, structuralism/deconstructionism, absolutism/nihilism: the one defines the other. So-called opposite characteristics do not contradict each other, but instead form two sides of the same coin.

In Perls’s paradoxical view, when one characteristic is foreground, another polarity remains present in the background, and it is possible to work with both polarities by bringing both characteristics into awareness. In this way, one can affirm the validity of both ends of the polarization. Polarization entails either/or categories that can become stuck and impervious to change (Kelly, 1955), and into which one classifies events or perceptions (Korb, Gorrell, and Van De Riet, 1989). The polarization of attitudes, feelings, and behaviors tends to make rigid a person’s view of self, others, and the world. Polarization is appealing because it appears to offer certainty and thus security in an uncertain world; “Polarisation of feelings, attitudes and values enable the individual to establish defining bases for relating to the world” (Korb, Gorrell, and Van De Riet, 1989, p. 14). Polarization is a prerequisite for fundamentalism, terrorism, and genocide, for it can mean individuals so strongly identifying with one polarity that they totally obliterate the other.

A dialectical perspective and attitude toward “truth” affirms the paradoxical nature of reality and, as such, is open to exploring the entire continuum between and including polarities. Growing and developing the capacity for seeing both sides requires a capacity for openness, a willingness for vulnerability, and the courage to sit with ambiguity, uncertainty, and “not knowing” (Gilbert & Evans, 2000). It involves a radical extension of Buber’s I–Thou, myself and the single other person, to embrace the multiple others, the community (Buber, 1923/1996). Such radical extension of I-Thou dialogue to the wider field exemplifies the postmodern spirit of open enquiry, rather than the postmodern skepticism that in extremis takes anti-rationalism to absurdity: Nothing is real, nothing is true, and nothing (I am) is important.

The epistemological bases of Gestalt psychotherapy include the nonlinear multi-
causality of field theory, the illumination of subjective personal experience of phenomenology, and the simultaneous exploration of both inner experience and outer engagement with the environment which is fundamental to holism. The dialogical perspective developed by the existential philosopher Martin Buber is compatible with all these epistemologies, and adds a further dimension crucial to Gestalt psychotherapy: the inter-human dimension.

Buber criticized the overemphasis of individual existence at the expense of human inter-existence. The inter-human focus of Buber incorporates both the I-Thou and I-It polarities of living and confirms our conviction that a paradoxical perspective toward polarities best fits the human condition. I-It is necessary for living, said Buber, but at the same time, without the I-Thou, we do not really live (Buber, 1996)!

**A New Paradigm**

The paradoxical perspective on polarities, the co-creation of dialogue, and an adherence to a truly interpersonal view of Gestalt psychotherapy offer the possibility of a new paradigm: “You are, therefore I am” which, paradoxically, could probably only emerge in this current period of history which is fast becoming known as the “Global Age.”

Buber’s emphasis on the I-Thou of relationship leads naturally to a belief in the co-creation or co-construction of all relationships. The therapeutic relationship is an interactional event in which both parties participate. With regard to the presence of the therapist, Staemmler writes, “Any attempt to negate subjectivity would mean to negate one’s own subjective humane-ness and thereby to withhold exactly the human counterpart from the client who s/he urgently needs for her or his personal growth” (Staemmler, 1997, p. 45).

Therapy is therefore not a one-sided relationship in which one party “does” to the other while the other is a passive recipient, but rather a constantly evolving co-constructed relational process to which client and therapist alike contribute.

The Gestalt perspective on the therapeutic relationship that is exemplified in the writings of Hycner, Jacobs, Staemmler, Wheway, and Yontef, (Hycner, & Jacobs, 1995; Staemmler, 1997; Wheway, 1997; Yontef, 1993) is close to intersubjectivity theory that emphasizes “reciprocal mutual influence” (Storolow & Atwood, 1992, p. 18). It is in turn similar to contemporary relational psychoanalysis which “views the patient-analyst relationship as continually established and reestablished through ongoing mutual influence in which both patient and analyst systematically affect, and are affected by, each other” (Aron, 1999, p. 248).

Stolorow and Atwood succinctly summarize this position: “[T]he trajectory of self experience is shaped at every point in development by the intersubjective system in which it crystallizes” (Storolow and Atwood, 1992, p. 18). They use the term “co-determination” to describe this reciprocal process in development and in psychotherapy (Storolow and Atwood, 1992, p. 24).

All three approaches to psychotherapy—dialogical Gestalt, intersubjectivity, and relational psychoanalysis—stress the mutuality of the therapeutic process, although
the techniques used, views of transference and countertransference, and manner of relating vary widely.

It seems characteristic of a “new” paradigm that its central ideas emerge outside a single group or school or movement engaging a wider participation across diverse cultures. “You are, therefore, I am” is emerging not simply within and across relationally oriented psychotherapies, but throughout the world as we evolve the notion of the global village.

Arguably, the new paradigm was first manifest with the failed attempt at a League of Nations early in the 20th century. It emerged again through Gandhi’s nonviolent protest, and we see it again with the founding of the United Nations. Though riddled with human error and frequent political mischief, the United Nations nevertheless reflects the stumbling emergence of the birth of the new paradigm. Examples continue with:

- the demolition of the Berlin Wall;
- the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in South Africa which so far has thwarted the bloodbath anticipated by many with the ending of apartheid;
- the prolonged ceasefire in Northern Ireland that seemed virtually impossible less than a decade ago;
- “Live 8”— a popular outpouring of “You are, therefore, I am” with regard to our brothers and sisters in Africa;
- the growth of eco groups and communities that share a respectful attitude toward the planet that sustains us.

All these are examples of the emergence of the new paradigm which suggests a growing consciousness of the interconnection and interdependence of all races and cultures and of our intimate relationship with the natural world around us.

Will this attitude of “You are, therefore, I am” continue to grow and develop and ultimately defeat the cynicism, greed, and violence that has been an epidemic in the modern age? It is to be hoped that humanity’s incredible ability to survive and adapt will make it so.

Certainly we witnessed a remarkable expression of this new paradigm in Israel at the beginning of September, 2006. There, in the very heart of the storm in which political leadership on all sides appears bankrupt, where resolution of the conflict appears hopeless, a new possibility is emerging from the grassroots which could eventually shake the very foundations of the old paradigm of violence.

Ali, a Palestinian, was at the meeting in Tel Aviv and told us he had spent four years in an Israeli prison because of his involvement in the Palestinian resistance. Later, after his brother was shot at an Israeli checkpoint, he had asked himself, “How many Jews do I have to kill in order to get revenge?” He has since chosen the way of non-violence. Nuella was also at the meeting in Tel Aviv. She is the widow of an Israeli air force pilot shot down in action. She and Ali work together in Israel and in the Palestinian territories, crossing the borders, sharing their stories, often initially having to face considerable anger and hatred from all sides.

Ali and Nuella are members of a group of about 500 families that was first estab-
lished in 1994 as The Parents Circle by an Israeli father whose 19-year-old son was kidnapped and killed by Hamas. The Parents Circle is now called The Families Forum. The Forum works to resolve conflict through dialogue and mutual understanding. Because of the lack of trust or empathy between Palestinians and Israelis, the Forum presents a different perspective, working to imbue both sides with a sense of tolerance and reconciliation rather than hatred and revenge. Through courageously sharing personal and painful stories, each side experiences the pain of the other and thereby undermines the tendency to polarization. If you can look into the eyes of the another human being and feel their pain and your own, it is impossible to kill them!

The new paradigm of “You are, therefore, I am” was summed up succinctly by Desmond Tutu, speaking in New York in 2004:

Peace is possible when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable. When we discover the reality that our happiness is bound up in the happiness of the other. We are bound up together in the bundle of life and no one is free unless we are all free. The Family Forum have experienced truth through suffering and loss. They have found there is more that unites us than divides us, that we are all members of one family [Archbishop Desmond Tutu in a speech, 2004].

The Scourge of Tribalism

Tribalism dominates the older paradigms. In the long history of the planet, homo sapiens arrived just a few minutes ago. Only recently our ancestors roamed the jungles and forests. If they heard a tree branch snap or a strange sound in the grass, then those who survived were those who immediately considered the probability of danger and grouped together for protection. We are descendants of the survivors, the paranoid, and as such we are still genetically and fundamentally paranoid and tribal. A terrorist bomber in Iraq, Afghanistan, Madrid, London, or at the school at Beslan must polarize their victims in order to feel no empathy. They dissociate any sense of the other as a human being. Aerial blanket bombing and guided missile strikes mean the people who push the button no longer sees a human being, only a target. They are not present to experience the result of their actions in terms of the devastating impact on the other. Instead, they deny the reality of their actions by referring to civilian causalities as collateral damage! The Families Forum creates the conditions for “seeing and feeling the other,” so that “You are, therefore, I am” can be realized.

Self AND Other

During the meeting in Tel Aviv, I experienced a deep conviction that the war in Israel and Palestine is not “a war over there.” Given certain field conditions, such violent conflict between different tribes, races, religions is possible anywhere in the world. We will never find a solution to violence in the world until we find a solution within ourselves, until we can truly see and feel the other, every day that we are engaged in
violence, in one form or another. We need to extend our perception of violence beyond the physical and include the psychological and emotional violence we create whenever we lose sight of the other.

Let us consider this within our own profession of psychotherapy. Traditionally, schools of psychotherapy have tended to exist in relative isolation from each other. There has been little access to, or interest in, “rival” theories. Indeed, the proliferation of “different” schools of psychotherapy post Freud appears similar to the proliferation of religious denominations following the breakdown in the monopoly of the Roman Catholic Church.

Within each psychotherapy “denomination,” there seems to me a fundamentalist element that preserves the founding teachings relatively unchanged, holding them as universally valid for all time, thereby underpinning dogma rather than supporting dialogue and critique. Perhaps this is a contributory factor in the proliferation of “schools” since a controversial idea may ultimately be forced to find a new home elsewhere. No wonder those brave enough to disagree can feel their views are tantamount to heresy and go underground.

The marginalization of certain schools of psychotherapy is thankfully slowly diminishing. However, this is being replaced by restrictive practices among psychiatry, psychology, and psychotherapy. No one is really fooled when a medical doctor and, in some cases, a psychologist with little or no training in psychotherapy disqualifies a psychotherapist who has trained for at least four years. This is not about standards. It is about territory, power, and money and it is a form of violence.

There is also marginalization within schools of psychotherapy as one training group claims to have higher standards than another, or argues about which is the true Gestalt or true Integrative approach or true Freudian perspective. There is a common standard established by the European Association for Psychotherapy (EAP) throughout Europe for psychotherapy in general and a specific standard for Gestalt therapy established by the EAGT. All may achieve the standards and some may surpass them, but the existence of a common standard means there is no excuse for perpetuating the “better than” mentality. This is just another manifestation of tribalism in a different guise.

So, while physical violence is epidemic, there are other, more sophisticated ways of destroying a person’s heart and spirit.

Violence is a contamination of conflict but peace is never conflict-free. Peace does not mean the absence of conflict, but rather the capacity and maturity to sit with and tolerate the conflict that we experience both within and between, when we encounter difference. Full contact requires the appreciation of difference and not the obliteration of difference. Even a respect for difference can become polarized and oppressively politically correct when we ignore the opposite polarity: what we have in common!

The new emerging paradigm, “You are, therefore, I am,” demands a costly letting go of our addiction to violence in all its forms, overt and subtle, physical and psychological. Instead, it requires a real willingness to live with the conflict inherent in tolerating difference, recognizing what we have in common, holding the other in the I-Thou attitude.

I want to conclude by emphasizing that we are only now discerning the emergence
of the new paradigm. Much work needs to be done to further develop critical reflection of its potential and possibility.

**The Human Spirit**

The two short passionate statements that follow are published in The Families Forum information leaflet. The first, from a Jewish parent, and the second, from an Arab parent, both confirm for me the necessity to commit to the new paradigm, and herald the hope that is inherent in “You are, therefore, I am.”

**My Son**

My youngest son, David, was killed on March 3rd, 2002. There can be no worse sentence for a mother to write than this. One moment he was there, a gifted musician, a committed educator. The next, at an isolated roadblock in the West Bank, David was shot and killed by a Palestinian sniper. The Families Forum provides me with an answer to the pain and anger I felt... I am consoled only by the thought that my work will somehow prevent one family, on either side, from facing the horror of losing a son.”

- Robi Damelin

**My Son**

I lost my beloved son, Ghasan, on September 1st, 2003. He was 27 years old. As Israeli tanks rolled into Nablus that day, Ghasan ran into the street to warn a group of children to go home and stay safe. He was shot by soldiers and died one week later. Nine other members of my family have died as a result of the conflict. My other son, Marwan, who was badly beaten by soldiers, read about the Families Forum... He contacted and joined because he believes in peace and reconciliation. I too am a member and the support of other mothers in the group helps ease my pain and brings me hope.

- Elham Elshoabe

Shalom. Peace to us all.

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