

Spirituality and Gestalt: A Gestalt-Transpersonal Perspective

LYNN WILLIAMS, P.H.D.

A B S T R A C T

Many people who have participated in Gestalt therapy and training often label their experiences as having been profound and spiritual in nature. Aspects of Gestalt therapy have been connected to a variety of religious and spiritual traditions. Literature and personal experience in Gestalt circles have provided testimony to connections between a Gestalt approach and spirituality. Integrating transpersonal perspectives may provide a comprehensive and clear outline of the connections between a Gestalt approach and spirituality, a definition of spirituality, and implications for spiritual development. This article explores Gestalt theory and transpersonal perspectives and principles, such as Ken Wilber's model of spirituality and spiritual development, Wilber's Big Three model; dialogical approach to relationship; and Jorge Ferrer's "participatory knowing," to begin to outline a relational and interactive model of spirituality and spiritual experience. This Gestalt-transpersonal framework can illustrate more clearly how spirituality manifests itself in Gestalt therapy and in the therapeutic relationship. This approach also emphasizes using the relational field as the basis for higher spiritual development in both the client and the therapist.



Lynn Williams, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist experienced in providing individual, couples, family, and group counseling. She received her graduate training from the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology and additional professional training at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland.

Todd Burley, Ph.D., served as action editor on this article.

Introduction

Many people who have participated in Gestalt therapy and training often label their experiences as having been profound and spiritual in nature. Aspects of Gestalt therapy have been connected to religious/spiritual thought in traditions such as Zen Buddhism (Greaves, 1976; Joslyn, 1977; Eynde, 1999), Tantric Buddhism (Greaves, 1976), Taoism (Gagarin, 1976; Schoen, 1994; Wolfert, 2000), the teachings of the Kabbalah (Snir, 2000), the Eastern spiritual philosophy of Krishnamurti (Horne, 1973; Schoen 1994), and Christian theology (Wells, 1985). Of course, these connections make sense because the early founders of Gestalt therapy were influenced by various spiritual traditions. For example, Fritz Perls studied Zen Buddhism and existential philosophy (Shane, 1999), Laura Perls and Paul Goodman were both interested in Taoism (Serlin & Shane, 1999; Shane, 1999), and Laura Perls studied under existential philosopher Martin Buber and existential Protestant theologian Paul Tillich (Serlin & Shane, 1999). Literature and personal experience in Gestalt circles have provided testimony to connections between a Gestalt approach and spirituality. Integrating transpersonal perspectives may provide a comprehensive and clear outline of the connections between a Gestalt approach and spirituality, a definition of spirituality, and implications for spiritual development. Transpersonal psychology has attempted to define and investigate concepts of spirit and spirituality. Consequently, integrating transpersonal and Gestalt perspectives may provide a more concise definition of spirituality, illustrate more clearly how spirituality manifests itself in relationship, and examine the role of spirituality in development. Specifically, this article will use Ken Wilber's model of spirituality and spiritual development, Wilber's Big Three model; dialogical approach to relationship; and Jorge Ferrer's "participatory knowing" as the bases for developing a Gestalt-transpersonal framework and a relational model of spirituality in Gestalt therapy.

Ken Wilber and Jorge Ferrer are widely known as leading transpersonal theorists (see Wilber, 1995, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2001; Ferrer, 2002). In 1983, Ken Wilber stopped referring to himself as a transpersonal theorist and preferred to characterize the work he was doing as "integrative" or "integral." He describes Integral Psychology as more inclusive than the schools of Transpersonal Psychology. This article will use the term transpersonal in a general way. Gestalt therapist Naranjo (1978) defines transpersonal as simply awareness and "...that which lies beyond the 'person' in the sense of a conditioned and individual personality" (p. 75). Although this article uses this general definition, differences between the integral and transpersonal fields is respected. It is also important to acknowledge that although Ken Wilber and Jorge Ferrer both describe their approaches as "integral," they also have differences in their respective definitions.

Gestalt and Spirituality

The connection between the Gestalt approach and spirituality has been shown in many diverse ways. For example, some researchers have viewed the Gestalt approach

as a type of technique applied to areas that incorporate religious perspectives, such as pastoral counseling (Filippi, 1990) and Christian ministry (Richardson, 1976). It has also been shown to be effective in helping people deal with issues related to religious values (Zamborsky, 1982).

When Gestalt-oriented writers typically define or describe “spiritual,” they most often are referring to aspects of spirituality inherent in religious traditions, particularly Buddhism and Taoism. For example, Naranjo (1978) describes “awareness cultivation” and the “prescription of virtuous relationship” in Gestalt as similar to concepts within Buddhism (p. 80). Doelger (1978) shows that the Taoist doctrine of inaction, or *Wu Wei*, is similar to Gestalt theory’s concept of organismic self-regulation, or the centering process; and the principles of unification and integration in the human system are similar to the Taoist concept of yin/yang. It has been speculated that the goals of Gestalt psychotherapy (growth, awareness, creativity, integration), Zen Buddhism (Buddha-mind, perfect inner freedom), and Transcendental Meditation (Unity-consciousness, God-consciousness) are essentially the same, despite having different names (Stallone, 1976). Kennedy (1998) describes the Gestalt approach as a “way of being in the world” and not just a type of therapy (p. 88). He outlines three principles that facilitate spirituality in Gestalt: co-creative dialogue, temporality (being in the present, in my body), and horizontalism (we are all equal as humans).

Other authors connect a Gestalt approach with spirituality in a much broader way. For example, Crocker (1999) defines the spiritual and spirituality by making distinctions among human spirituality, spiritual reality, and spiritual experience. She defines spiritual reality as a “significant mystery” that is not fully knowable, controllable, or predictable; spiritual experience as a meeting with this significant mystery; and human spirituality as “the ability to be present with and receptive to a significant mystery, and then to interact appropriately with it” (Crocker, 1999, p. 335). She describes Gestalt therapy as honoring spirituality by placing human spirituality at the core of its work. Similarities between Gestalt therapy and spirit-directed therapy have also been drawn (Scerbo, 1983). Walker (1971) indicates that in order to recover spirituality, one must recover the body and the center of existence, which he calls life-energy and breath-soul. Gestalt therapist Kennedy (1998) points to sensory experience of the body in relationship as the starting point for an embodied type of spirituality.

Spirituality Defined

While these descriptions begin to outline what spirituality is in relation to Gestalt theory, it has been difficult to develop a clear definition of spirituality (Fredericson & Handlon, 2003). When most people think of defining spirituality, they think of God, organized religion, and/or an afterlife. While spirituality can encompass these, there are many other definitions.

Ken Wilber provides a concise definition of spirituality that encompasses the variety of ways spirituality can be conceptualized. Basically, he describes several definitions of spirituality that include the following: spirituality is the highest level of development; it is a separate developmental area; it is an attitude (such as love or openness); and

it involves peak experiences (Wilber, 2000a). He states that these definitions are not “mutually incompatible,” can fit together, and “deserve to be included in some degree in any integral model” (Wilber, 2000b, p.5). He also describes authentic spirituality as a developmental transformation of consciousness in which a person not only believes in and has direct experiences of Spirit, but there is also a realization and experience of Spirit without separation. That is, there is a transformation from just observing Spirit to being both the observer and the observed.

A Gestalt-Transpersonal Perspective

By identifying and examining Gestalt theory with aspects of Wilber’s definition, it is possible to create a clearer picture of the intersection of spirituality and Gestalt.

1. *Gestalt therapy cultivates spirituality as an attitude (such as openness or love) and can have benefits similar to spiritual awakenings.*

Fritz Perls said “awareness per se of and by itself can be curative” (Perls, 1992, p. 37). Gestalt therapists value highly several forms of awareness: somatic, cognitive, and emotional awareness in the present moment. Having the awareness to experience and to examine self in this multidimensional way begins to open our minds, bodies, and hearts to Ultimate Reality or Spirit. Gestalt therapist Kennedy (1998) tells us that “embodied awareness” not only leads to self-understanding but also begins our spiritual journey (p. 88). Many spiritual traditions have meditations, prayers, and rituals that incorporate multidimensional awareness and experience. Stevens (1977) describes the attainment of fulfillment as “...when you stop emptying yourself by trying to fill yourself and simply let the world to fill you” (p. 269).

Because of the fundamental principles of valuing awareness and awareness cultivation, another prevalent aspect of Gestalt therapy is being open to whatever arises in the present moment in an intentional and nonjudgmental way. This quality of awareness is similar to concepts from major spiritual traditions. For example, in Buddhism, mindfulness is a key agent of change; in Christianity, the present moment is a sacrament; and in yoga, awareness of breath is the doorway to enlightenment. Simply noticing what is in your awareness has been known to produce feelings of compassion in Gestalt therapy as well (Resnick, 1977).

Wolfert (2000) describes the Gestalt principles of refraining from preconceptions, and openness of the self to what emerges, as rooted in and parallel to Taoist traditions. Through this attitude of openness, a flexibility is present that allows for creativity and sacred experience to emerge. This practice of open attention within Gestalt therapy is similar to many forms of meditation (Naranjo, 1970). A Gestalt approach also challenges us to sit in openness with feelings of not knowing, lack of meaning, or emptiness. These feelings are often associated with the feeling of “a void.” Sitting in “a void” is a familiar aspect of Taoist and Zen Buddhist traditions (Van Dusen, 1977). This is often called a “fertile void” by Perls or place of “creative indifference” by Friedlaender in Gestalt psychology (Frambach, 2003). It is the center from which all phenomena arise. Wolfert (2000) tells us that it is through dwelling in the fertile void

that we can have deeper contact and allow spiritual experience to enter. This fertile emptiness also has been compared to the psychological openness of grace in Christianity (Van Dusen, 1977).

Cultivating awareness is a Gestalt goal that can facilitate identification of wants and needs while at the same time helping the person identify how they prevent themselves from getting their needs met. Similarly, in the Buddhist view, mindfulness helps us to break unhealthy habits that cause suffering, which then enables us to liberate ourselves from our own conditioning (Walsh, 1999). Thus, cultivating “awareness” or “mindfulness” can result in similar benefits.

2. Gestalt therapy cultivates and also mirrors spirituality by involving peak experiences.

Peak experiences are also called spiritual, transpersonal, or mystical experiences. These experiences typically expand one’s sense of identity, or create a sense of identity that includes the person and yet is “beyond (trans) the individual or personal” (Walsh & Vaughn, 1993, p. 3). This expansion of self typically includes broader aspects of life or the universe. Many people report peak experiences as enhanced feelings of love and perception (Vich, 1992). Perls (1976) has described these experiences as “mini-Satoris,” a term that refers to individual enlightenment in Zen Buddhism (p. 133).

Peak experiences are often difficult to put into words. Gestalt therapist Stevens (1977) knows he has had a spiritual experience, but can’t quite describe it. He states, “I don’t consider myself religious, yet when I’m somewhat awake, I feel an involvement with my living that often brings tears to my eyes” (Stevens, 1977, p. 269). Gestalt therapist Bate (2001) says that part of her development was initiated with the feeling of a connection with “...God (or ‘Higher Power’ or whatever you want to name this)” (p. 125). Teasdale (2001) offers three models of God that provide a framework to help pinpoint the essence of experience/connection in peak spiritual experience. The three models are (you can substitute the word God for another word that fits for you): “...you are God, you only have to realize it (Hindu); you become God (that is, an enlightened being) through your own hard effort (Buddhist); and you unite with God by participating in divine nature (Judeo-Christian-Islamic)” (Teasdale, 2001, p. xi). Thus, peak experiences may reflect realization, becoming, and/or uniting with something within and/or beyond ourselves, depending on our personal orientation or tradition.

Many people have reported peak spiritual experiences as a result of Gestalt training or therapy (Killoran, 1993; Kolodony, 2000). How should we understand this connection? A common misconception of the term “beyond the person” is that the personal, or individual, is absent. Clarkson (1997) describes a transpersonal relationship as an encounter with another person that allows an ethereal figure to enter in between the people. In her view, the relationship is characterized by a “lack of person to person connectedness” (Clarkson, 1997, p. 66). Wilber, however, tells us to think of “transpersonal” as “personal plus” rather than “personal minus” (Wilber, 1995). Gestalt therapist Hycner (1988) agrees, saying that you can only know what is beyond the personal if you go through the personal. Therefore, Gestalt therapy’s approach of focusing on the relational, intersubjective aspects of experience (the personal) makes human con-

nection and relationship the basis for an embodied type of spiritual experience (beyond the personal). Wilber's (2000a) words reflect this type of Gestalt-transpersonal approach to relationship: "In the deepest within, the most infinite beyond" (p. 108). This view, then, whether in spiritual and/or Gestalt experiences, contradicts the common misperception that ultimate spiritual experience is a letting go of earthly things. In fact, premature letting go rather than going through is sometimes called a "spiritual bypass" (Welwood, 1984, p. 64). Through the texts of story writers, poets, and philosophers, Gestalt theorist Schoen (1994) suggests that the "infinite" or "eternal" as described in religious traditions are "immediate facts" that are contained within ordinary experience (p. 251).

According to Wilber (2000a), it is important to distinguish between peak experiences that happen in pre- versus post-conventional awareness. Wilber (2000b) thinks of spiritual development as a process in which consciousness evolves from lower to higher levels. This process begins with the preconventional, preformal, prerational level, and then moves to the conventional, formal, rational level, until finally reaching the postconventional, postformal, postrational level. There are some superficial similarities between the "pre" and "post" stages of development, and a lower level of development may be mistaken for a higher one. This occurrence is called the pre/post or pre/trans fallacy (Wilber, 1995). With respect to peak experiences, Gestalt therapist Kennedy (1997) asks, "Can you have an experience of presence that is without its content?" (p. 123). To answer Kennedy's question, you can have peak experiences without the content, as Wilber's words (2000a) indicates in the following quotation:

Many people confuse the warmth and heart-expanse of post-conventional awareness with the merely subjective feelings of the sensory body and, caught in this pre/post fallacy, recommend merely bodywork for higher emotional expansion, when what is also required is postformal cognitive growth, not simply preformal cognitive immersion" [p. 120].

By heeding Wilber's warning against pre/post fallacy, Gestalt therapists could not only increase the potential to help a person have more peak experiences, but have peak experiences with postformal cognitive growth. This level of experience and integration can facilitate higher spiritual development, as discussed in a later section. In addition, it is important to know that one of the goals in a spiritual developmental framework is to turn these transient peak experiences into more permanent states of awareness and/or experience. In other words, the objective is to turn "mini-Satoris" into the ultimate Satori.

3. Gestalt therapy cultivates spirituality within a developmental framework, primarily through heightening awareness on multiple levels.

Gestalt therapy, basically a developmental model in which integration of self takes place because of interactions within a relational context or field perspective (Wheeler, 2002), has been thought of as a type of meditative technique leading to spiritual transformation (Au, 1991). By examining Wilber's Big Three model and a dialogical ap-

proach to relationship, we can begin to create a model of spirituality that is essentially relational and can also be meditative and spiritual. This contradicts the traditional view that meditative and spiritual practices are only done solo.

Wilber has developed a comprehensive and integral model of consciousness that is typically portrayed in a four-quadrant model. Although his entire model goes beyond the scope of this paper, Wilber has offered a simplified form of the model known as the Big Three. It is important to note that this version does not reduce or diminish the core truths in his model and the quadrants, but rather offers a simple way to summarize the four quadrants (Wilber, 2000c).

Essentially, the Big Three portrays an integral or holistic way to view ultimate Reality, Truth, or Spirit and development. He has called his Big Three model as applied to the area of spirituality the “Three Faces of Spirit” or “The Spiritual Big Three” (Wilber, 2000c). He uses three elements that, in combination and with awareness, can provide a map of Spirit that can help us view Spirit in relational interactions. The first element is the “I” or Subjective Truth; it focuses on the “interior of the individual” or the subjective aspect of consciousness, which includes individual thoughts, feelings, and sensations. The second element is the “We” or Intersubjective Truth; it emphasizes the relational/social aspects of experience and our interconnectedness through which we feel communion, resonance, and the mutuality of relationship. The third element is the “It” or Objective Truth, which is related to pure awareness, holds duality and nonduality, and essentially is the nature of all things or the “ultimate It” or “ultimate Truth” (Wilber, 2000c). In this view, holding awareness of Subjective, Intersubjective, and Objective Truths simultaneously can help us more fully experience Spirit in our interactions. Wilber (2000c) states, “Spirit manifests in all four quadrants equally, and so all four quadrants (or simply the Big Three) ought to be taken into account in order for the realization of Spirit to be full and complete and unbroken” (p. 121).

Wheeler’s (2002) Gestalt developmental model highlights the Subjective and Intersubjective Truths in relationships. In this model, individual experience is subjective, but the experience is always happening within an intersubjective field, or a “dynamic context of constant interaction and mutual influence” (Wheeler, 2002, p. 37). In his view, we use our subjective experience held within an intersubjective context as a starting point for spirituality. Wheeler (2000) calls this relational emphasis and awareness:

...intuitive truth ... as close to us as the face of someone we love ... the deepest truths of that nature and that awareness, and of our own lived and felt experience. Our evolved, human self-process is not something apart from, and opposed to, all of our instincts for relationship, meaning, and a rightly ethical stance in our human world. Rather, in a desperate and suffering world, these instincts and intuitions are our nature. Our human world is the arena of the full expression of our spiritual nature and of our natural self-process, both of which must be ultimately the same [p. 385].

A dialogical approach is often the basis of relationship in Gestalt therapy. This

approach contains an I-Thou process whereby one values both the separateness and relatedness of other as described by Buber (as cited in Hycner, 1988). The dialogical experience or “I-Thou moment” in relationship is deeply intimate; through the “in between” or “meeting” in relationship, the individual surrenders to the forming moment, and individual identity is experienced and yet transcended (Jacobs, 1995). In essence, the “I” (or Subjective Truth) experiences the spiritual by being touched by its relationship to the external world (or Intersubjective and Objective Truths). A “...dialogical attitude of relating and awareness of being” has also been known to produce feelings of compassion (Wheway, 1999, p. 127). The dialogical approach to relationship has been thought to connect us to an “Eternal Thou” (Hycner, 1988) and is similar to one’s relationship with God (Buber, as cited in Harris, 2000). Zinker (1977) describes being fully present in relationship as similar to “worshipping together” (p. 17). Gestalt therapists Gutierrez and Belzunce (2003) state that through the use of self as an instrument in relationship, one can “allow the appreciation of Beingness and Wholeness to manifest” (p. 200).

As discussed above, the Objective Truth aspect is the essential nature of all things and can hold duality and nonduality. It is similar to the concept of “zero point” in Gestalt. Perls (1969a) describes this concept: “Every event is related to a zero point from which a differentiation into opposites takes place” (p. 15).

The dialogical approach illustrates a way to hold the “zero point” or hold both duality and nonduality in relationship. The duality aspect of this relationship emphasizes the uniqueness and separateness of each person. The nondual perspective in relationship is somewhat more complex and can more clearly be demonstrated by Wilber’s (1995) description of the transpersonal relationship, or the “I-I” relationship as defined by Ramana Maharishi. In the “I-I” relationship, there is no perceived separation between subject and object, or self and other. Wilber (2001) states, “...the inside world and the outside worlds are two different names for the single, ever present state of no boundary awareness” (p. 54). In the I-I relationship, the person-to-person connectedness is so great that the individual self expands in order to experience the true nondual nature of all things and people by connecting with other. Wilber stresses that “the more I go into I, the more I fall out of I” (Wilber, 2001, p. 54).

For Wilber, the “I” represents both self and other, as it does in a Gestalt approach. In other words, when the individual “I” experiences other, the individual “I” connects more deeply with a larger sense of “I,” or Self, and expands to include the source of all things. This sounds a great deal like what happens in bringing about a heightened awareness within relationship in Gestalt terms. When one is engaged in “I-I,” or has achieved a heightened awareness, one has the ultimate realization of being at the seat of all beings, the Heart, the Source.

More recent developments in transpersonal theory begin to look more and more like Gestalt therapy in that they now integrate dialogical and “I-I” perspectives by focusing on the relational and interactive components of spiritual experience. For example, Ferrer (2002) describes spiritual experiences not as individual, inner, subjective experiences, but rather as intersubjective, co-created, “participatory events” (p. 2). Similar to Gestalt, these events have the flavor of interaction and co-creation and can occur within

a relationship as well as other places (*i.e.*, sacred places, communion with nature).

Prendergast, Fenner, and Krystal (2003) describe therapy as a transformative process by which the therapist and the client co-explore “what is” or the essential nature of all things. The co-exploring role of the therapist honors both the separate and connected aspects of the relationship while facilitating a spiritual experience in therapy. Nevertheless, it is Ferrer’s (2002) concept of “participatory knowing” that illustrates best how the dialogical approach cultivates spirituality. In his definition,

...participatory knowing refers to multidimensional access to reality that includes not only intellectual knowing of the mind, but also the emotional and empathic knowing of the heart, the sensual and somatic knowing of the body, the visionary and intuitive knowing of the soul, as well as any other way of knowing available to human beings [p. 121].

Ferrer states that participatory knowing includes three fundamental elements:

1. Participatory knowing is presential.
Knowing is facilitated by presence, being, and identity.
2. Participatory knowing is enactive.
Knowing is dynamic and co-creative, involving the interaction of the elements involved in the participatory event.
3. Participatory knowing is transformative.
Knowing produces transformation in both self and world.

Thus, a dialogical approach, in the light of participatory knowing, is an opening up to Spirit in the here and now by opening up to this multidimensional reality or awareness (emotional, cognitive, somatic, etc.) along with the Big Three, in interaction between self and other. These notions parallel Gestalt therapy because the Gestalt approach emphasizes being fully present and aware in relationship in this multidimensional way, which creates both an opening and fertile ground for spiritual experience in a relational context.

Wheeler’s (2002) description of a Gestalt developmental model illustrates how this process is related to spiritual development. He says that in Gestalt,

...we are supported to understand and apply what we already know deep within: that every part of the field is a part of each of us.... We are unique but never separate. We are deeply part of each other and in our belongingness, to each other and to the field that we share, lies our full humanity, and our fullest individual development of self [p. 78].

The uniqueness he describes is related to the concept of Subjective Truth, our belongingness is related to the Intersubjective Truth, and the field that we share is related to Objective Truth, or the entire three-part model. Therefore, being engaged in a dialogical approach to relationship, or another form of “participatory knowing,” can be a process to uncover and co-create spirituality and spiritual experience. Similarly,

Wilber (2000c) has connected his Big Three model with notions in Buddhism: the Buddha is the great spiritual realizer (Subjective Truth or “I”), Dharma is the truth he realized (Objective Truth or “It”), and Sangha is the community circle of realization (Intersubjective Truth or “We”). The view of Gestalt theorist Kennedy (1998) appears to agree with this concept and points to the perspectival nature of our perception as one of the starting points for spirituality.

Imara describes Gestalt therapy as a type of “spiritual practice” (as cited in McConville, 2000). The integration of the concepts in Wilber’s Big Three model, Wheeler’s developmental model, the dialogical approach, and Ferrer’s participatory knowing provides a way to begin outlining the components of a spiritual practice in relationship, or what I like to call a “dialogical spirituality.”

Let’s look at why this might be important. When we begin to look at a relational model of spirituality, we see it as a type of spiritual practice, or an ongoing way to continue to get in touch with an experience of the spiritual, and also as a tool we can use to further our spiritual development. Wilber (2000a) states that spiritual practice is important because it can open one up to a direct experience of Spirit rather than just mere ideas or beliefs about Spirit. And, as I have tried to show, looking at relationship through a Gestalt-transpersonal framework, if we begin to outline the components that are operational, we can be more deliberate and intentional about tending to our spiritual practice and cultivating spirituality in relationship. We may discover that learning how to experience Spirit within the Gestalt-transpersonal framework of awareness, openness, participation, relation, multidimensional experience, and co-creation can lay the foundation for spiritual experience to emerge and thereby foster spiritual growth. Perls (1970) has said, “To me, nothing exists except the now. Now = experience = awareness = reality” (p. 14). I believe the Gestalt-transpersonal approach exemplifies this equation well and in addition, demonstrates that reality can also be called Spirit. As was pointed out earlier, Gestalt theorist Schoen (1994) suggests that the “infinite” or “eternal” described in religious traditions are “immediate facts” so embedded within immediate experience that in the pursuit of spiritual integration and development, there is nothing to transcend (p. 251). The concept of growth in Gestalt has been described as evolving through the continual process of realization of parts. The effect of this growth has been labeled as spiritual or an awareness of essence (Resnick, 1977). The Gestalt-transpersonal model outlines the components of these parts in the Now, making them easily available and increasing their ability to be cultivated more often, thereby furthering growth.

Some critics have charged that participatory knowing is too identified with values that focus on relationships, communities, the relational self, and dialogue, and therefore is unable to reach the higher levels of spiritual development, or second-tier thinking (Paulson, 2004). Beck and Cowan (as cited in Wilber 2000a) distinguish two types of thinking. First-tier thinking is characterized by an inability to step out of its own world view, while second-tier thinking, the highest level of consciousness, is characterized by an ability to examine all stages of development and their respective roles. I believe the Gestalt-transpersonal approach, which incorporates participatory knowing within a developmental framework, has the potential to develop second-tier thinking.

When we look at spirituality in the context of Wilber's development model, we see that higher development, or multilevel awareness, can occur only when spiritual experiences become permanent traits rather than temporary states (Wilber, 2000a). A goal of continuing to practice a Gestalt approach as a "spiritual practice" is that one will be able to increase awareness and embodiment, change a temporary state into a permanent trait, and attain a higher level of spiritual development. Perls tells us if we want Satori, or to wake up in the world, we need to practice with strong discipline, an important element in the Zen tradition as well (see Eynde, 1999). Thus, in cultivating this higher level of spiritual development with discipline, we may be a step closer to fulfilling Wheeler's (2002) ultimate developmental goal of touching our full humanity and completing our "fullest individual development of self" (p. 78).

Gestalt-Transpersonal Approach in Practice

Important in the application of a Gestalt-transpersonal approach is the recognition that all experiences facilitated by Gestalt therapists are spiritual in nature and are held within a context of spiritual development. In his developmental model, Wilber (2000a) describes nine levels or "fulcrums" through which the Self evolves to reach "Enlightenment." These levels outline issues commonly addressed in Gestalt therapy, such as strengthening boundaries, getting in touch with one's feelings, and dealing with the need to belong. Looking at these ordinary psychological issues within a spiritual developmental model illustrates how these issues can be spiritual in nature and how working through them is essential to attaining a higher level of spiritual development. In the "upper" levels of the model, the Self becomes more subtle and includes, yet transcends, the individual self. This consciousness includes worldcentric, global, and nondual awarenesses. In a Gestalt-transpersonal approach, it is also important to recognize that these "upper" level experiences exist and are not just transient peak experiences or "mini-Satoris"; they have the potential to become permanent states. Also, with the right conditions and level of consciousness, these experiences can be facilitated and integrated in a way that fosters a higher level of spiritual development.

I believe that Gestalt therapists who incorporate a dialogical approach already illustrate a Gestalt-transpersonal approach to some degree, primarily by their incorporation of dialogical principles and techniques and their focus on being with the client in the "in between." Jacobs (1995) describes the contact process of dialogue, according to Buber's principles, as both facilitating higher development and transcendental. In a Gestalt-transpersonal approach, the therapist has this focus, but highlights and uses the relational field in a multidimensional way (holding subjective, intersubjective, and objective realities, and emotional, cognitive, somatic, etc. awareness). The therapist also examines the work within the spiritual developmental framework. This approach emphasizes using the relational field as the basis for higher spiritual development in both the client and the therapist.

The Gestalt-transpersonal approach does not necessarily contain any mention of organized religion, God, and the like in the relationship to make it "spiritual"; rather, it is the Gestalt-transpersonal experience of the therapist and/or client that is primary,

and that is what makes it “spiritual.” Gestalt therapist Joslyn (1977) describes how we might bring this consciousness and experience to the relational field, “...two people interacting with no mention of zen yet with each word or action full of zen...” (p. 255). Essentially, incorporating this level of consciousness and multidimensional experience into a relational model of spirituality to self, other, and the “in between” that can hold both duality and nonduality is the heart of a Gestalt-transpersonal approach. Greaves (1976), who has incorporated Tantric and Zen growth methods into Gestalt therapy, recommends criteria for groups of people who have and have not had a positive response to the combined methods. Because of the subtlety of the approach, I believe the Gestalt-transpersonal approach can be used with any person. Stevens (1977) describes Gestalt as a personal practice or a way of living “...that you do *with* others not to them” (p. viii). In heightening this experiential realm, it is also important to address post-formal cognitive growth in both the therapist and the client to maximize integration, growth, and development from these experiences.

Conclusion

Our exploration has illustrated how human relationships, such as the one between a client and the Gestalt therapist, can deepen the spiritual experience, and thereby further the psychological and spiritual development of the self and awareness of the other. Thus, including the spiritual dimension in the context of relationships can facilitate healing by widening the range of experiences that can occur, and providing a larger context for the relationship.

This paper’s discussion of insights and connections between Gestalt and transpersonal psychology has tried to outline in a comprehensive and clear way the connections between Gestalt and spirituality, a definition of spirituality, and implications for spiritual development.

By incorporating key concepts that illuminate the spiritual dimension, such as Ken Wilber’s model of spirituality and spiritual development, Wilber’s Big Three model; dialogical approach; and Jorge Ferrer’s “participatory knowing” into relationships and psychotherapy, we can begin to define spirituality and more clearly illustrate how it can manifest itself in genuine person-to-person contact.

Not only does this help make it easier to describe what has been experienced by some, but making these Gestalt-transpersonal principles more explicit also can significantly broaden the field and context of Gestalt therapy, and clarify the spiritual/transpersonal implicit within a Gestalt approach.

Fundamentally, this Gestalt-transpersonal framework can help us understand why people who have experience with Gestalt therapy and training often label their experiences as profound and spiritual in nature; taken together, they explain why many people have labeled a Gestalt approach a part of their “spiritual practice” or a “way of being” that contributes to their spiritual growth and development.

It is hoped that this article can begin to engender more awareness and discussion of Spirit and the spiritual in all of those who are touched by a Gestalt approach.

Lynn Williams, Ph.D.
 1535 Weymouth Circle #309
 Westlake, OH 44145
 lynnjan@adelphia.net

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