

NOTICING WHAT'S NOT THERE

Draft Keynote Address by Gaie Houston, Manchester AAGT Conference on Borders, Bridges and Differentiation, July 2008.

Dan began with something very important, that Daniel Sterne might call 'reinforcing the Core Self', the sense of self that is necessary for healthy functioning. That is a solid, indeed the only proper foundation for looking round and deciding, or rather, imagining, what we are going to do now we know better who we are. What borders do we put up, and how much do we stay inside them? Where if anywhere shall we build bridges?

The title words of the conference merit more than four days of pondering. Think of borders. The so-called haves, the nations who have, are seeing the arrival of have-nots, and are often strengthening their borders against them. The Berlin Wall came down, yes. The Great Wall of China proved completely ineffective as a border. Yet new walls run through the centre of Nicosia, round the edge of Palestine and Israel, along the Mexican border with the USA. And on. Liberals may open their arms and call for freedom from boundaries. But differentiation is the whole story of evolution. Humans by nature form groups of every size. In political terms, unless there are some game rules about group membership, the group melts into a mass. Humans as masses are scary.

That means I and you if we are configured that way. Already I am talking at what may seem beyond the borders of gestalt therapy. I want us to cross some of those borders.

NOW

In a sense, to continue with Daniel Sterne's theory, my talk will concern the Emergent Self. [At a very early meeting of the AAGT in the States, I remember Sterne being adopted as a Gestalt theory enhancer. So I feel at ease quoting him.]

The Emergent Self is the state in which all the data whirl around seeking organisation, rather than adapting to a handy established pattern. It is a first state for a baby, and a necessary state in all creative experiment. Creative experiment is a theme I want to develop.

Much of what I will say is my reading of some of the data around us now, and of my take on some significant missing elements. Now is this invisible moment, the nanosecond contact, narrow ridge between past and future. Now also has larger time-space meaning. The geological now is often invisible because it is vaster the empires and more slow. Yet it is impinging on us and we on it. And there are the cultural Nows that shape our lives. Think about it. Now, for instance, there exist suicide bombers. But for us at this conference they are mercifully mostly somewhere else.

That does not stop them affecting us in material as well as psychological ways. We are, in terms of world population extremely well-off. That advantage gives us the space to look wide and far. E.M. Forster said that to have liberal ideas you needed a private income. We are in something of that position.

Heraclitus insisted, thousands of years back, that all is change. Times change and we are changed in them. So what's new? How is this now different from 1951 or 1981?

Gestalt Therapy as developed by its first inventors was a philosophy with a therapeutic methodology incorporated in it. I feel enormous delight and gratefulness for this opportunity to play with ideas about applying more of that philosophy of awareness, contact and response-ability.

So, I am interested in making bridges to other ways of working, that are certainly practised already by some of you, and that best respond to the world we find ourselves in.

BELL CURVE THEORY

I can start with a diagram that I prefer you to imagine, rather than to put on a screen to look at. It is a bell curve. The idea is that all enterprises travel such a curve. Those that keep going have learned that when they reach the top of the curve, just when all is going very well, then is the time to change. More commonly, they do not look to change until they have begun the slide down the far side of the bell, by which time gravity is inclined to do for them. Each of you will have your own notion of where Gestalt Therapy is on that continuum. I would like to take it that we are still near the top. Here we are, a world-wide organisation, probably more numerous than we have ever been before. For years we had a very small literature, and now stacks of books are written on the topic, and Gestalt journals are maintained or even being born in many countries. Training institutions abound world-wide. So, in terms of the bell curve theory, it is no time for complacency. It is a time for change.

What change? Working within our familiar field has great importance. Theory, new nutrition, from the neurosciences, from other schools, needs to be chewed over, in part swallowed, then have the useless stuff spat out. New learnings about cultures and contexts of therapy need constant attention. This conference will I am sure work towards important changes to skills and theory and applications.

POWER

In some ways we are not all at the top of the bell-curve. The United Kingdom is not the first country to lose, or be threatened with the loss of, statutory recognition. This is a serious threat to our power.

We have not prevented this, so arguably we have let it happen. At the inaugural conference of the UKAGP this February, I quoted Foucault on the power of professional bodies, which he calls disciplines.

Foucault describes, chillingly, what he calls disciplinary power:

“This is the ordinary form of power by which we can expect to be invaded in modern times. If the discipline involved finds us a threat to its considered formulae, we will be attacked and dismissed. If we augment their story, we will be applauded and asked to join. If we do neither, we will be ignored altogether. In this way, the individual will become progressively more insignificant.”

[Foucault, 1980 Power/Knowledge Pantheon: New York]

He is talking of the individual. Gestalt has always been a maverick, a bit of an individual in the world of therapy. Do we want to be progressively ignored, and left alone, telling each other, truthfully to my mind, that we practice a philosophically tenable and demonstrably effective form of therapy? Or do we want to join? If so, how are we going to augment their story, the story of the manualised therapies, evidence-based, lickety spit, targeted neurosis weeders-out? In terms of power, we cannot beat them. A fine two-chair dialogue seems needed between these two poles: our under-evidenced practice and their albeit constrained clarity and clear outcomes. CBT is one modality that has been sanctioned. A magnificent difference between Gestalt and CBT, is that CBT is intrapsychic, and Gestalt is directly relational. Like people. Or at least like those it is often most rewarding to grow by. Knowing how to be with people in other than power relationships is under threat.

At the same time, I see power itself as a most important therapeutic issue. It sometimes seems to be one of those scotoma, the blind spots, the significant missing elements in therapeutic focus. I come across people who don't like the word, equating it with force or overpowering.

I take it to mean the energy by which I meet or withdraw, speak out or retroreflect, push or give in. I do not see it as good or bad, but as ubiquitous, a way of describing what we are all operating all the time unless unconscious. As a therapy we have not used our power to get recognition. We do clients a disservice if by some parallel process in our meetings we keep power out of awareness.

Training institutions have the opportunity of modelling power-sharing, letting students devise curricula and share assessment. Some already teach the dynamics of small groups, rather than simply manage those dynamics. A few use the large group as an instrument of learning, letting people experience the potent emotionality of that size group, and find how to stay response-able there. All action is political. All psychotherapy is social therapy. It is more thorough when it allows insight into the power of different fields on the organism. And I know well that Freedom, which means proper exercise of power, awareness and responsibility, is tiring. Leaving it to our governments, though, has currently landed us in a hideous series of wars and so-called peace keeping exercises, of economic crises and the strong possibility of extinction by drowning, starvation or Armageddon, or a grand cocktail thereof.

There is widespread disillusion with politics in the way they are conducted now. Discovering, probably re-discovering, and bringing into existence forms of organisation that give more participation, more power and response-ability to members, looks to me an extraordinarily significant missing element in the world now. Gestalt is largely to do with context, background and foreground,, the field. In parenthesis here I want to sound a small note of protest at the growing use in this school of therapy, of the word bracketing. The whole point of gestalt formation is that it is not about deliberate cutting off, cutting out, bracketing.

It is to do with allowing the organic emergence of the foreground, from the field of data, of phenomena in the context of here and now. So let us not bracket.

SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

Experiment is one of the defining characteristics of gestalt therapy. At best it is spontaneous. By that I do not mean narrow and impulsive. I mean that it needs to arise from the dialogue, come as an inspiration of one or other interlocuteur, as more of the field, the facts of the matter, are brought into awareness. The experiment is a bold response, involving the self as function rather than the self as image. There needs to be a sense of excitement and growth in the undertaking. These are words that to me come usefully near love and away from fear.

There are inspiring precedents in our history. Moreno's amazingly imaginative social experiments underpin and inform our methods.

Goodman's social interventions in the sixties can be described as releasing personal power, showing people how to dare to be real. Anarchy is too sophisticated a political system for our present state of evolution. But perhaps we need the anarchic spirit, the awareness and confidence to use power to innovate, to aggress in the gestalt sense, rather than to conform.

Goodman's *communitas* can be understood as a sense or spirit of the group that amounts to a kind of hard-wired morality. My son has recently visited many tribal peoples, asking them what it is that has preserved them, when modern groups of roughly the same size tend to blossom and fall like day lilies. **Respect for the community** was the common theme, wherever he went in the world.

It sounds much like Goodman's *communitas*. Our theory and skills equip us to model that sense of community, of **belonging as anarchic equals** rather than from merely neurotic dependent needs.

I think, perhaps dream, of different experiments we need to undertake, if we pay attention to the **wide** here and now. The parts of the world usually called the West have a strong tendency to materialism and to the cult of the individual, and we are embedded for the most part in that culture. One on one therapy is presently far more common than group work, in spite of the obvious economic, as well as psychological advantages of working with ten rather than one person at a time. In this country, therapy focussed more on the intrapsychic than the interpersonal has found favour with the authorities who will regulate our professions. The self is forged in interaction. The argument for group therapy is enormous; but it does not suit the often regressive needs of client and therapist. There are social, interpersonal and relational values and recognitions that characterise Gestalt. They seem to me to be in some peril.

The evidence is so familiar that it is easy to ignore. I think it amounts often in me to communication-fatigue and a consequent alienation from most of the troubles around, rather than an excitement to deal with any of them. With the miracle of the internet, it becomes easier to reduce carbon footprints, as we strangely call them. It is also easier to create and inhabit virtual, maybe slightly mad, worlds, inhabited by avatars, murdering and pillaging their fantastic ways through untouchable landscapes. Untouchable. Incapable of scent or true reciprocation. This attenuated contact belongs with disastrous narrowness to what Stern calls the Narrative Self, that sophisticated net of words that can catch and reveal subtleties of truth, or entangle memory and invention so that dialogue falls through its every interstice.

Many children in many countries have TV sets and computers in their bedrooms. The models daily before them are whatever the TV companies offer, rather than much of the slower and less jazzy education of parental example and family disciplines. A police commissioner in this country a few weeks ago spoke anxiously of what she called a generation of almost feral young people. They are alienated from their parental generation, and have made a peer culture of violence. A play by a black Londoner at the National Theatre two years ago showed what is known to its adherents, I think swaggeringly, as *Bad Man Culture*. To have recognition in this culture, you have to demonstrate that you are prepared to attack physically, to wound or kill, anyone, enemy, relative, stranger or associate.

The writer explained in the programme how his seven year old son was disappointed in him as a father, because he would not knife or shoot anyone. What kind of a Dad was that? I am not describing some small anomaly, but a pervasive knife and gun wielding, frightened unhappy generation growing up to be what? What sort of work force? What sort of parents? What sort of preservers of the fragile planet?

What that suggests to me is that work with children and families is a need that has not yet managed to organise the field. Thankfully, though, some of you are doing it.

But maybe that is by no means enough, if we think about the next bell curve, how the next need may best organise the field. My son has recently spent time in many tribal societies, asking them what has made them persist for many generations, while modern organisations of somewhat the same size, spring up, flourish and decay like mushrooms. A major finding was that the sense of the tribe was ahead of the sense of the individual. Behaviour was conditioned by what was right for the tribe rather than one person.

The village or encampment was cleaned and tidy not because I am worth it, not because my neighbour deserves it, but because we expect it. Education in how groups best function, how we best use our membership, is a blind spot, out of fashion where I see it as sorely needed, here in what is laughingly called the developed world. Now I think of the thousands of places where social intervention is needed, where we might jump a border or build a bridge. Start small. One to one therapy can often best be a form of truth and reconciliation exercise. Nelson Mandela used it in the political sphere to remarkable effect. Such glimpses of what we are really doing show me the possibility of using gestalt therapy in more than remedial application. Not instead of, but as well as.

What is now called social enterprise comes about in this way. Someone both notices the blindingly obvious, sees a need for action, and, most crucially, sets about taking that action. For example. Prisoners in this country, when released from jail, have to tell any prospective employer about their criminal record. Result, no job. Further result, back to crime and jail. One person in dialogue with prisoners had the idea that a creative experiment would be to give them training while in prison to run their own business. He arranged set-up funding, and mentoring on release. The experiment works, in that re-conviction rates for people in the scheme are 4%, compared with 87% for the rest.

I can recall other other examples, as you perhaps can, of experiments that required bearding local Councils, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, real chutzpah in their execution. As you listen you may remember social experiments you have made or heard of, that began with noticing a gap, a significant missing element.

This led to a dream, an idea. Instead of leaving the idea in that most comfortable place, the Why-Don't-They file, someone dares turn it into an I'll-Try-That. That is the place of risk and excitement and growth.

We have moved from the family and children, to larger groups. Then there is the whole earth.

A LARGE GESTALT

What preoccupies me, maybe you too, is the doom scenario for the planet. That much-misrepresented founder of this therapy, Fritz Perls' words: scotoma, blind spots, holes in the personality, apply with wonderful aptitude to the behaviour of governments around the world. Little is done in the face of the unresolved polarities of greed and poverty. Speculators buy forward in grain, and poor people starve. The earth, like a starving mother herself, is milked dry of fossil fuels which then poison her with their fumes. The ice caps are melting. Glaciers recede at eight metres a year. Recession is mentioned, as if it will last a year or two and then be followed by good times, meaning material expansion and a higher standard of living for the sort of people who have air-conditioning. What is going to make for those good times, as world population multiplies, the globe warms, and social divides breed lawlessness and plunder? Growth in the economy is still widely seen as a good rather than the cancer it may well turn out to be. Corn is still being turned into gasoline while Mexicans go hungry and the rain-forest recedes ever faster. This is the environment from which we are indivisible.

Closing Experiment

[This was not done at the conference, as the Chair wanted a dialogue between the two speakers. I include it, as many people afterwards said they wished there had been time for discussion. Perhaps it can happen now.]

We have awareness, contact and personal response-ability as our tools. Marx had a fine little model, called maximum and minimum goals. The maximum goal is where you ultimately want to be. It equates perhaps to Plato's ideal, or to the vision and mission statements of current organisational management. The minimum goal is, to stay with politically suspect sources, in line with Chairman Mao's dictum that every journey begins with one step. In other words, every now action is towards or away from that vision, hope, maximum goal, call it what you will.

Before your reactions to the morning so far have been dissolved in coffee, I propose five minutes talking to someone near you about your maximum goal for gestalt therapy, and minimum goal towards that for yourself.