

A Brief Review of Gestalt Facilitation

Paul Barber 2008

A Definition

‘Gestalt’ is a German word meaning pattern or constellation. As an approach it encapsulates a wide ranging and holistic vision focused upon ‘direct perception’ and what a person is sensing, feeling and projecting out upon the world, rather than what they are thinking or interpreting.

Historical origins

Historically, Gestalt has been largely associated with Fredrick (Fritz) Perls, a therapist who grew tired of psychoanalysis and its interpretive and passive approach and incorporated aspects of theatre and drama, humanism and oriental philosophy to develop a more robust and engaged approach to psychotherapy, which in the spirit of his time sought to create a new vision of the human being, one determined by social responsibility and compassion for others. Creative art and healthy living were seen by Perls as evolving out of ‘immediate inner experiencing’ and the dynamics of emotion, and the themes of expression and the valuing of feeling, intuition and subjectivity live on in Gestalt.

Fritz Perls experienced the horrors of warfare and mass destruction in World War 1, and was for a time an army psychiatrist. He also studied Zen in Japan. He was responsible for highlighting self responsibility and personal choice in Gestalt, and for popularizing the use of experimentation to arrive at a workable solution. He is recorded as saying “Lose your head and come to your senses” – emphasizing the need to contact the environment rather than to think about it. He has also been reported as saying to a client who was straining for a long time to work something out “If you can’t shit get off the pot” – meaning if the time is not ripe then stop. Recordings of his work with more extravert American clients in workshop settings cause his practice to appear more challenging and confrontational than is reported by his individual clients.

Modern-day Gestalt has tended to distance itself from Fritz Perls and to draw closer to the ideas and practice of his wife Laura. Laura Perls, who similarly to Fritz was a psychoanalyst, studied philosophy and is credited to have been the first analyst to sit facing the client – rather than behind them as they lay on a couch. She was an accomplished artist and came from a highly cultured loving family, in contrast to Fritz’s family – whose father sold wine, was often drunk and hated his mother (Perls 1969).

While Fritz Perls travelled widely and ran many public workshops to demonstrate and publicise how Gestalt worked, Laura applied Gestalt to clients in one-to-one therapy, developing Gestalt’s more gentle and dialogical nature. Laura’s approach emphasised body-work and supported the integration of the ‘I-Thou’ relationship and

‘phenomenology’, she also contributing a great deal to Fritz’s writing.

Although many influences have shaped Gestalt, such as psychoanalysis, the psychology of perception and humanistic psychology; almost all those who originally contributed studied Eastern philosophy, especially Taoism – with its emphasis with staying with what is unfolding and invitation to be led by the unknown – and Zen-Buddhism, both of which emphasise a concentration on immediate experience and the here-and-now. Because of this Gestalt blends Eastern and Western philosophies.

Gestalt has had a major influence on NLP, Psychodrama, Family Constellations and continues to shape self psychology, education and consultancy.

Gestalt principles

A Gestalt practitioner (someone who practices Gestalt in coaching, education, group facilitation, research or organisational consulting) builds an authentic relationship and engages in a dialogue to explore how an individual, group or community’s ‘awareness’ is being constructed in their immediate environment. Central to this process is a Gestalt practitioner’s ability to embody a genuine, interested, non-judgemental presence, and to use sufficient artistry to creative away of casting light on ‘what is happening’ and ‘how it is happening’ now.

Practical experimentation is also a central feature, and it has been suggested that ‘if a picture is worth a thousand words’, in Gestalt ‘experience is worth a thousand pictures’! In this context ‘raising awareness’ is both the main method and major outcome of Gestalt, which is concerned with ‘*being*’ and ‘*becoming*’ rather than ‘*doing*’ and playing a ‘*role*’.

As a practical philosophy Gestalt encourages us to:

... *Be person-centred and respectful of the human condition* – as it encourages the development of ‘empathy’, ‘authenticity’ and ‘unconditional positive regard’ and supports a non-judgmental and non-directive peer approach to others;

... *Contact experience as a whole* – as it strives towards an appreciation of everything that influences the energy pattern or ‘field’ of a relationship and all that impacts upon our awareness now;

... *Examine how people create meaning* – as it seeks to understand how we construct meaning from events and attempts to develop a ‘felt sense’ of experience which illuminates how we form our own unique reality;

... *Become non-interpretive and to suspending judgement* – as it focuses upon what is here-and-now rather than looks for historical causes or existing theory to explain events;

... *Learn experientially through action* – for it supports active exploration rather than intellectual speculation and the generation of theoretical frameworks;

... *Look to influences above and beyond the self* – as it dismisses nothing while attempting to respect the message of everything plus our quality of presence or ‘being’ in the world.

Field Theory

Gestalt draws from 'Field Theory' (Lewin 1952), which suggests that 'groups of things' – or 'fields' – can develop a collective influence and intelligence of their own. For example our cultural origin is a 'field' of influence that shapes us in a specific way – a way which causes us to respond to 'meanings' as much as situations. In this context a person or group or organisation cannot be understood in isolation from their dynamic context, their historical origins, social network and community – the 'total situation' or 'life space' they co-exist within.

At the individual level we are reminded here that although we may have a mind, body and emotions we do not act as a series of 'parts' but as a 'relational whole' and that we 'perceive our world as a whole'. In groups I often invite members to consider the following questions to raise our awareness to 'the field' we are embedded within (adapted from Parlett 1991):

- *"How are people and events organised here?"* (Here we explore how tasks and social processes shape individual behaviour or inform organisational culture).
- *"What influences of the present explain our current behaviour?"* (Here we focus upon what is actually happening at this moment).
- *"What is unique about our current situation?"* (Here we focus upon our specific differences and special character).
- *"What is in the process of becoming and forming?"* (Here we honour the principle that everything is in flow, mutating from second to second and subject to constant change).
- *"What are we possibly blind to or excluding at this time?"* (Here we consider everything we might be missing).

An example of the above 'field analysis' is shown below from a workshop setting:

"How are events and people organised here?"

The course content and developing learning culture appears to energetically cement the group together. As the facilitator I seem to act as a culture carrier and symbol of leadership, partly supported by my tutor status and role of group leader; prior exposure of individuals to teacher-student conditioning in earlier classroom settings my also influence us here. Looking closer at the impact of earlier learning we can speculate that our exposure to the parent-child relationship may also inform the teacher-student relationship we experience, plus our professional training; note, the participants here are nurses who have received training within a large hospital setting which has emphasised conformity and a respect for 'authority'.

"What influences of the present field explain current behaviour?"

A culture of experimentation in the group seems to influence what emerges, as individuals are starting to experiment with taking more risks there is an excitement and expectation that we are creating something new and different here.

"What is unique about the present field?"

This is a multi-racial group on a professional up-date programme that will never be repeated; it is also the first time participants have been willing to take risks to the degree they are doing so today.

"What is in the process of becoming?"

A new level of contact and honesty is beginning and the risks people have taken today are changing our usual holding back from social engagement. This may bring us closer together and cause us to be more adventurous in future. One thing seems obvious, social constraints are starting to dissolve and a new sense of authenticity is emerging.

"What am I blind to or excluding at this time?"

I am aware the course is in its final stages, and wonder if I am ignoring my own irritation with how slow this group was to form a learning community and to get going, or if I am shielding my self from a sense of personal or professional failure in having taken so long to reach this more productive phase? I am also aware that although racial and issues of authority were raised, gender and sexual issues were never brought to attention nor addressed in this group.

It might be useful for you to conduct a similar exercise to the above upon a group experience you have shared.

Gestalt Contact-Withdrawal Cycle

Gestalt practitioners often draw attention to how we become aware of our needs and strive towards meeting these in our environment. For example, we refer to 'the Gestalt Contact-Withdrawal Cycle' which assumes that human beings are generally at rest until stimulated into environmental awareness through a currently emerging need. Whether a person or group's need is for stimulation or nourishment, whether they react to internal or external stimuli the following biological cycle is suggested to come into play:

Sensation: sensory experience of the environment or self, which in turn develops into...

Awareness: a surfacing and focus on feelings, ideas and needs, and onwards to...

Mobilisation of energy: an awakening of motivation to meet a need, and so to...

Excitement: the engagement of physiological energy, which in turn leads to...

Action: an act of concentration and behaviour, which stimulates movement towards...

Contact: need fulfilment through a better meeting with self, others or environment, to...

Withdrawal: a sense of natural completion and rest.

Interestingly, when people – or even organisations – get stuck between any of the above stages, certain conflicts are suggested to develop; note also the remedies suggested to get individuals and organisations moving healthily again:

1. Interruptions between Withdrawal & Sensation – The Suppressed State

When a person, group or company is unable to move from withdrawal into sensation they experience a sense of disconnection; having little sensory input they rarely show feelings or excitement, are withdrawn and tend to rely on mechanistic rules/controls.

Remedy - Draw attention to the sensory world and awaken a client or group to the sights and sounds around them; coach them to move, explore and engage.

2. Interruptions between Sensation & Awareness – The Over-Excited State

When a person, group or company is blocked between sensation and awareness they experience sensations, but do not know what they mean or what to do with them; they

habitually respond with emotional excitability; are dramatic, chaotic or excited by turn. **Remedy** – Develop sensitivity to the interrelationship between environmental causes, social action and psychological effects, and encourage strategic thinking and action.

3. Interruptions between Awareness & Mobilization – The Aware & Angry State

When an individual, group or organisation is unable to move from awareness to a mobilisation of energy, there is much intellectual reflection but little movement; energy is blocked for fear of unleashing emotions which threaten control; blaming others and holding on to hurts is the norm. **Remedy** - Encourage the client to feel their emotional energy and to consider experimental action.

4. Interruptions between Mobilization of Energy & Action – The Fearful State

When individuals, groups or companies get stuck here there is much internal energy but this never leads to action; they hold back and play safe because change includes ‘risk’; experimentation and action is therefore avoided. **Remedy** - Encourage expression and engagement with emotional energy, and support the client to experiment with behaviour strategies.

5. Interruptions between Action & Contact – The Task State

Individuals, teams and organisations here feel out of contact with the world and needy, boundaries are felt to be weak and emotional diffusion renders engagement superficial; there is an obsession with detail and performing tasks to perfection, people are serious and output is high. **Remedy** - Help the client locate and release their energy; build up a sense of empowerment and self-identity; cultivate self-control and practice aware self-expression.

6. Interruptions between Contact & Withdrawal – The Burnout State

Individuals, teams and organisations that cannot turn off or rest may strive to achieve a continuous high; they can’t let-go and tend to hang-on to an experience long after it has served its purpose. **Remedy** - Focus upon the stress that is resulting from lack of rest and on what needs to happen to complete an activity; build an appreciation of how to recognize when something is finished.

So which of the above best describes an organisation you deal with or work with? And what might you do to support its health?

Gestalt encourages a practitioner to work alongside their client on mutually agreed contract and goals, within a relationship which is authentic, valuing of openness and focused upon the clarification of meaning. It is at heart person-centred, action-orientated and open to guidance from the energetic field relationships create. In this context, a practitioner does not apply techniques so much as apply themselves to Gestalt’s ‘working principles’ and let the here and now, their client’s inner wisdom and their own intuition guide them.

But there is also a spiritual discipline in Gestalt for me, a quality akin to Buddhism and Taoism which encourages a freeing of the mind and a loosening of the intellect so I can be guided by a intelligence higher than my own. Some gestalt practitioners call this ‘listening to the field’ or ‘being guided by the wisdom of uncertainty’. I prefer to see it as surrendering to the fertile void – something unknown and unknowable. When I can quieten my own desires I find intuition calls to guide me. I therefore encourage

in my self and others the cultivation of ‘spaciousness’ and a willingness to be informed by something beyond ourselves.

*Suppress the impulses of will, unravel errors of mind, un-tie the knots of virtue.
Calm and Clear and Empty – the state of doing nothing in which everything
gets done (Loa Tzu).*

The Holistic Field – Mapping our Multiple Reality

The mode of facilitation described here builds upon ‘field theory’ and the Gestalt principles cited above into a model where a facilitator is seen to attune to differing levels of reality – both within themselves and in others – with a view to illuminating multiple levels of influence. It originally arose from doctoral study (Barber 1990) into group facilitation plus an examination of how various schools of therapy – especially Gestalt, Humanism, Therapeutic Community Practice, Transactional Analysis and Group Analysis – addressed the human condition.

Underpinning this model is an intention to ‘heal’, to make things whole. I believe it has much to offer not only organisational consultants and coaches, but teachers, trainers, social workers, therapists, managers, researchers and all professionals dealing with people.

As I see facilitation as an art that illuminates and enhances the human condition through an ever widening and deepening dialogue, if my interventions do not cultivate a better home for the human spirit in my individual and organisational clients, I deem myself to have failed.

Essentially, the facilitative model employed in this text endeavours to fashion in facilitators and clients alike, alertness to:

- ***Physical/Sensory Reality*** as evidenced through our bodily engagements – gathering data & attending to cognitive & biological aspects of environment;
- ***Social/Cultural Reality*** as conventionally taught & intellectually constructed – engaging & analysing the cultural context, values & norms;
- ***Emotional/Biographical Reality*** as felt in reference to earlier experience – charting motivational patterns & releasing emotional blocks;
- ***Imagined/Projective Reality*** as conjured up via projected images from the self – exploring metaphor & the effects of unconscious bias & meaning;
- ***Intuitive/Transpersonal Reality*** as intuitively & symbolically created – exploring unknown potentialities & surfacing spiritual values.

Each of these ‘phenomenological realities’ I suggest flow together to co-create our ‘life-space’, and when taken together describe the holistic nature of people, teams and organisations plus the complexity we meet within a group or community system. They also focus our Gestalt interventions to a purpose. What this means to a group facilitator or organisational consultant is portrayed in **Figure 1** where differing levels

Figure 1

LEVELS OF EXPERIENTIAL REALITY

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(Physical/Sensory Reality as evidenced through our senses)

Here we explore our experience through the route of our senses, what we see, hear & touch, as we engage with our own physiological being & meet our various biological needs. Here we need to differentiate between observations & interpretation.
(Facilitative Activity: gathering data & attending to the sensory & physical environment)

(Social/Culturally Reality as conventionally taught & intellectually constructed)

Here we view experience as representative of the conventional social world & the norms culture enshrines, seek out leadership & purpose, structure time in task driven ways, & re-create our more usual roles & cultural engagements.
(Facilitative Activity: engaging & analysing the cultural context, values & norms)

(Emotional/Biographical Reality as felt in reference to earlier experience)

Here we recreate & enact earlier relational patterns, transfer in prior learning & memories of the past to the present, & are thus re-stimulated into earlier emotional reactions &/or dramas as we act-out victim, persecutor &/or rescuer behaviour scripts.
(Facilitative Activity: charting motivational patterns & releasing emotional blocks)

(Imagined/Projective Reality as conjured up via projected images from the self)

Here we experience with reference to the fantasies & the imagined reality we project out & see reflected back in the world, includes the imaginary figures & archetypes we have internalised & unconsciously compare ourselves to & mould ourselves upon.
(Facilitative Activity; exploring metaphor & the effects of unconscious bias & meaning)

(Intuitive/Transpersonal Reality as intuitively & symbolically created)

Here our experience is informed by the collective unconscious & a meeting with the unknown & unknowable, as glimpsed through our tacit connection with the divine, mystical, symbolic & other transpersonal phenomena over & beyond the self.
(Facilitative Activity: exploring unknown potentialities & surfacing spiritual values)

of engagement are seen to require very different ways of 'being' and 'intervening' i.e.

At the ***Physiological/Sensory level*** which concerns '*physical reality as perceived via our senses*' a facilitator needs to attune to conscious manifestations of behaviour which are generally the furthest from everyday awareness, are included interventions directed towards illuminating a person, group or community's ecological interdependence and what they co-create through a dialogue between the physical world and their sensory perceptions. Here we seek to create an environment conducive to continuing motivation and stimulation, attend to physical energy, bodily needs and functional health, while encouraging physical expression. Facilitation at this level involves an appreciation of sensory feedback and the wider environmental field, can employ body-work such as massage or share concrete observations and involve training to physical skills. Individuals and groups learn in an experiential trial-and-error way here as they strive to quench their physiological needs and experiment with the environmental support available as they engage in everyday tasks to conquest ever more physical territory. Facilitators need to attune to their own physicality and sensate function to read the group energetically at this level.

ii) The ***Social/Cultural level*** which relates to '*reality as it is intellectually conceived and conventionally taught to be*' represents a conscious level of functioning informed by cultural rules, intellectual theories and models. Here a facilitator is encouraged to build a relational container able to support a viable learning culture in which participants can voice their needs while experiencing social motivation, complete necessary tasks, explore problems and experiment with possible solutions. Educational interventions designed to shape group culture or seeking to clarify purpose or to maximise relational potential occur here, as do systemic, strategic and developmental approaches attentive to 'the community', organisational culture and social behaviour. At this level people learn in a communal and interactive way through social identification, imitation and by role modelling others. Socialisation and cultural induction happen here. What a facilitator role-models consciously and unconsciously and how they handle their authority has great power at this level.

iii) At the ***Emotionally/Biographical level*** where '*emotional and biographical aspects of reality*' surface for address, a facilitator may use more 'therapeutically' inspired interventions or psychodrama which wanders into a semi-conscious zone just out of mind. Interventions designed to manage, direct and release long pent-up emotions are focussed here, as are facilitative actions designed to raise awareness to the historical emotional patterns (transferences) that drive behaviour. Fostering alertness to earlier learning that underpins current activity and the games people and organisations play occurs at this level. Facilitators need to be emotionally fluent, to be able to access their own emotional octaves and to know their own relational baggage to be effective at this level.

iv) At the ***Imagined/Projective level*** and '*life as fantasised and imagined to be*' we experience a twilight existence which is largely unconscious but may be gradually brought into conscious awareness through pattern recognition. Here a facilitator might set about challenging collusion, thus illuminating the individual or the group shadow or blind-spots, or illustrate and bring to attention unconscious processes and dynamics in an effort to demonstrate how hidden agendas and imaginative projections are acted out

individually and collectively. At this level people and groups often need others to draw attention to their blind-spots and raise attention to the archetypes, metaphors and myths that drive them. Facilitators here need to be aware of their own projections and innermost needs if they are to escape being trapped by projective identification or a seduction to feelings of omnipotence.

v) At the *Intuitive/Transpersonal level* and ‘*reality as spiritually guided*’ which is tacit connection to influences over and above themselves. Here a facilitator might draw attention to a person, group or community's essential uniqueness, or work towards envisioning their greater purpose and latent potential. People at this level learn intuitively, as when a flash of insight suddenly makes clear something that has previously lain out of awareness. Inspiration and creativity may also be suggested to flower at this level, plus insight into an individual or group’s unique purpose or Dharma. A facilitator here needs to serve what is authentic, to intuitively flow with the facilitative field and to surrender their ego so as to be guided by a greater source than themselves.

As the imagined-projective and the intuitive-transpersonal level are less accessible to our awareness than others, we will examine these in greater depth later in this account. But as ‘Gestalt’ is the fluid cement that holds the above model together, we will push a little deeper into what a Gestalt approach to facilitation really implies.

Beginners often drink in new theories and skills until their minds are water-logged; more advanced scholars move beyond this dizzying array of detail and informational clutter to allow what they have learnt soak from their head to their body. Only when they embody their learning do they set themselves free. So un-clutter yourself, hold your learning gently, play with it and trust it to guide you. As you come to rely less and less on ‘having to know’, your presence and the knowledge you embody will start to come through. Wisdom is forged in this way.

Gestalt Principles – Being More & Seeing Further

We heard earlier how ‘Gestalt’ cultivates an authentic relationship and develops an accompanying dialogue through which to explore how an individual or community’s ‘awareness’ is being constellated in their immediate environment. Central to this process is the creation within the facilitator of a genuine, interested and non-judgemental presence focused upon everything that happens.

At root, Gestalt is more concerned with ‘*being*’ and ‘*becoming*’ rather than ‘*doing*’ and strives towards an appreciation of the whole energetic field of the facilitative relationship and everything that impacts upon our awareness – now. Being ‘phenomenological’, it is more interested in what is emerging and how we are constructing meaning, which leads to the development of a ‘felt sense’ of what we experience. Being non-interpretive it focuses upon what is being co-created here-and-now rather than attempts to apply theory to practice or to seek out historical patterns. A bit like an intensive case study it tries to illuminate and raise awareness through an ever deepening description of events and an appreciation of the influences that currently shape reality. It also emphasises a dialogical approach to learning, coaching and consultancy, within a relationship which Yontef (1993) reminds us embodies four

main characteristics:

1. **Inclusion.** Putting oneself fully 'into the experience of another' without judging, analyzing or interpreting, while simultaneously retaining a sense of one's own autonomous presence; this demonstrates the interpersonal application of a Gestalt practitioners trust in 'immediate experience' – which is sharpened to increase our client's self-awareness.
2. **Presence.** The Gestalt practitioner expresses themselves to their client 'regularly, judiciously and with discrimination' so that their client is continually informed as to the observations, preferences, feelings, personal experience and thoughts they are bringing to the relationship; in this way a practitioner role models phenomenological reporting which builds trust while raising awareness to the usefulness of immediate experience; all this is performed to encourage the client to regulate themselves mindfully and autonomously.
3. **Commitment to dialogue.** Contact is more than something two people do to each other – it is something that happens between people, something that arises from the interaction between them; a Gestalt practitioner surrenders him or herself to the interpersonal process, thus allowing contact to happen naturally and authentically rather than by manipulating, forcing contact and controlling the outcome.
4. **Dialogue is lived.** Dialogue is embodied rather than 'talked about', emphasizes the excitement and immediacy of moment-to-moment action and may include movement, dancing, art-work, enactment, guided fantasy, words and song, experiential experimentation, indeed anything that gets the communicative juice and energy of relational expression moving between participants.

Strategically, within the above dialogical framework a facilitator is encouraged to work alongside their client on a mutually agreed contract and goals, within a relational container which is authentic, values empathy and openness while focusing upon the clarification of meaning and purpose. From this stance 'intellectual knowing' is secondary to 'experiential wisdom' – what you actually experience, and 'awareness' is the catalyst of change and a primary goal; but what the client does with that 'awareness' is for them to decide. This emergent approach stands in direct opposition to prescriptive coaching or consultancy which works towards a set outcome. A Gestalt coach or consultant therefore does not 'prescribe change' so much as 'illuminate the current situation'. They invite you to be fully what you are within the present moment, for they believe a person's natural state as a single, 'whole and un-fragmented being' houses a natural organic state that embodies constant change.

Facilitating robust transactions between yourself and your environment, coaches in the Gestalt vein encourage you to contact your sub-personalities and conflicting parts, to work through any alienated or desensitized fragments so that integration, connection and change may begin. Thus, it is reasoned, by opening ourselves to becoming 'what we truly are', paradoxically, devoid of our deflections we become something else. In this context a coach or consultant works to expand awareness and to extend choice.

What Gestalt Focuses Upon

In the above light, while viewing organisations as 'living organic systems' or 'fields'

comprised of interrelating individuals, Gestalt practitioners attempt to raise awareness to how clients might meet their physical, social, emotional, psychic and spiritual needs while all the time serving the wider needs of the group, community or organisation. In this way a Gestalt approach attempts to account for the foreground (what is in emergence) and the background (context) – the specific and systemic: “... *a field perspective acknowledges the indivisibility of the individual and the environment, and the constant interdependence of the two (Parlett 1991). When we recognise this fully, it brings a wholly different dimension to the process of giving and receiving feedback at work. Behaviour is no longer seen as exclusively ‘owned’ by individuals, but as co-created, simultaneously constituting a response to environmental conditions, and also having some effect on these conditions*” (Coffey and Caicchia 2005, p. 20).

In the above sense a Gestalt informed coach or consultant is on the look-out for possibilities of co-creative or mutual adjustments between different aspects of the field within which their clients are embedded (Francis 2005). Essentially, as an approach to individual, group and organisational change, Gestalt integrates disparate parts of the organisational field to develop a clearer and lived appreciation of the whole ecological system – the individual as well as the community. It seeks to account for the ant as well as the cosmos.

Personally, as a Gestalt practitioner myself, I would like to further emphasise the ‘quality of presence’ and ‘awareness’ that facilitators need to bring to facilitation, plus the ‘authenticity’ they must communicate if they are to seed a culture wherein clients can develop trust. Add to this ‘a spirit of curiosity’, ‘interest in the human condition’ and ‘a willingness to risk and to explore’ and we have what I deem to be essential ingredients for excellence in facilitative practice. Perhaps one last thing is worth mentioning, an ability to convey the attitude of ‘life as serious play’ so that whatever dramas unfold, individuals – as in situations of play – feel permitted to explore the whole of themselves without fear of judgement or failure. In this context our facilitative skills dictate our professional and investigative competence, while the humanity we convey supports our ability to intervene in an authentic, explorative, grounded and non-judgemental way.

In essence, a Gestalt practitioner sets out to explore how an individual, group or community’s ‘awareness’ is being constructed right now in their immediate environment. Practical experimentation is a central feature of this process, and it has been suggested that ‘if a picture is worth a thousand words, in Gestalt experience is worth a thousand pictures’! Simply, Gestalt is concerned with ‘*being*’ and ‘*becoming*’ rather than ‘*doing*’ and playing a ‘*role*’. In summary, Gestalt:

- Being holistic (*looking at experience as a whole*) it strives towards an appreciation of everything that influences the energy pattern – or field – of a relationship and all that impacts upon our awareness now.
- Being ‘phenomenological’ (*looking at how people create meaning*) it seeks to understand how we construct meaning from events and attempts to develop a ‘felt sense’ of experience.
- Being non-interpretive (*suspending judgement*) it focuses upon what is here-and-now rather than looks for historical causes or existing theory to explain events.
- Being experiential (*encouraging action*) it emphasises active exploration rather than

intellectual speculation and the generation of theoretical frameworks.
- Being humanistic (*person-centred*) it supports a peer relationship rather than an authoritarian or specialist professional one.

We see from the above how Gestalt encourages a practitioner to work alongside their client on a mutually agreed contract and goals, within a relationship which is authentic, valuing of empathy and openness and focused upon the clarification of meaning. It is at heart person-centred and action-orientated. In this context, a practitioner does not apply techniques so much as apply themselves to the 'working principles' and 'methods'.

Joseph Zinker (1977) has observed that Gestalt, in order to develop an appreciation of "experience as a whole" employs the following principles and methods:

- *Principle*: An individual's personally created world forms his unique reality (*Method*: Staying in the present with the experiencing person to explore their reality).
- *Principle*: Individuals may at times interrupt their own needs (*Method*: Facilitating sensation, awareness, contact and movement to need fulfilment).
- *Principle*: All parts of the human being are dynamically interrelated (*Method*: Attending to physical posture, movement, thinking and feelings of a person).
- *Principle*: Effective learning takes place in the whole person (*Method*: Focusing upon blocks to perception, learning, movement and exploration).
- *Principle*: Every person exists in a continually changing world of experience (*Method*: Staying with the unfolding moment to moment process of an individual).
- *Principle*: A person's being in the world is experienced in the here and now. (*Method*: Emphasising and focusing upon what is being experienced in the moment).
- *Principle*: A person's habit forming mechanisms give them stability (*Method*: Exploring and locating habits of thinking and perceiving in the personality).
- *Principle*: Rigid self-concept is supported by rigid self-armour (*Method*: Locating and dislodging physical and mental resistances to new awareness) (Zinker 1977).

Holistic vision

In summary we may say a facilitator in the Gestalt tradition incorporates a quality of looking 'out upon the world' and 'in towards the self' where a facilitator is encouraged to:

- Retain an eclectic multi-dimensional and fluid stance to facilitation;
- Bring into focus physical, social, emotional, imagined and spiritual aspects of existence;
- Show interest in the quality and subtlety of experience plus tacit ways of knowing;
- Generate knowledge through dialogue, self reflection and social involvement;
- Focus on the dynamics and nature of 'the whole' of what is experienced/perceived;
- Look within the person for answers as well as out upon their behaviour and context;
- Champion the authority of what is actually experienced right now in the moment;
- Explore multiple levels of experience rather than search for a single irrefutable truth;
- Look to the inter-relatedness and interdependence of all influences and everything;
- Enquire within the frame of an authentic and intimate person-to-person relationship;
- Strive to 'be' co-inquirers alongside others rather than to 'do inquiry' upon others;

- Expand awareness and consciousness through respectful questioning and dialogue.
- Emphasise the authority of the person and their phenomenological experience;
- Endeavour to educate and learn from and develop all involved;
- Retain a flexibility of inquiry that allows new avenues of exploration to emerge;
- Take an interest in the 'how' much more than the 'what' of whatever happens;
- Attend to what is unique as well as what is general in the facilitative field.

This essentially, is the relational cement I employ as a facilitator in order to raise awareness and explore the aforementioned experiential levels of reality.

*“The physical world of form and phenomena is the totality of the known
manifested in the infinity of the unknown manifest consciousness.
I do nothing.
Being manifests, and living happens.
I am that consciousness.
You are that consciousness.
All that exists is consciousness” (Deepak Chopra 1996).*

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