

RENEWAL

PUTTING GESTALT INTO ACTION

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Towards super health – humanistic psychology and self-actualisation

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‘Health’ in this essay is not a medical condition free from illness but, rather, is deemed a natural state of being, where we are free from dis-ease. It is viewed as a striving towards self-actualisation, supported by humanistic notions of living life holistically (appreciative of all of us and everything around us), democratically (in dialogue and service with and to others), autonomously (with personal responsibility and self-support to the fore), so that life becomes experiential inquiry (action learning), informed by a commitment to personal growth. With this in mind, we can have meaningful experiences in illness that illuminate us, grow through pain and experience healthy deaths! Note, Joseph Zinker (a renowned gestaltist) studied under Abraham Maslow and did his dissertation upon the self-actualisation of a dying person.

So how did self-actualisation and growth permeate our communal psyche?

During the 1950s humanistic psychology arose as a reaction to two dominant influences upon psychological thinking of the time - psychoanalysis with its notion of the unconscious, and behaviourism with its emphasis on conditioning. Humanistic psychologists countered these pessimistic influences by championing human potential and individual choice, plus a focus upon personal growth and self-actualization. In 1962 Abraham Maslow published *Toward a Psychology of Being*, in which he described humanistic psychology as the ‘third force’ in psychology. Gestalt was part of this melting pot. Yet, as a Gestalt practitioner, I do not see psychoanalysis or behaviourism as competing schools, so much as contributions to my holistic understanding of the human condition.

Humanistic psychology expanded its influence throughout the 1970s and the 1980s and continues to rebuff scientific approaches to psychology, which it views as dehumanising and incapable of capturing the richness of conscious experience. Humanistic psychology has contributed to modern thinking in three ways: the provision of a new set of values for approaching an understanding of human nature and human kind; an expanded horizon of qualitative methods for inquiry into the study of human behaviour; a broader range of more effective person-centred process-centred methods in the professional practice of psychotherapy.

The beliefs of Humanistic psychologists resonate with much of Gestalt and its existential foundations, namely:

- To be mentally healthy individuals must take personal responsibility for their

actions, regardless if those actions are positive or negative.

- Each person, simply by 'being' is inherently worthy, for although they may act negatively such actions do not cancel out their value as a person.
- The ultimate goal of living is to attain personal growth and understanding, for only through constant self-improvement and self-understanding can an individual ever be satisfied and actualised.

Humanistic psychology, on the rise during Gestalt's co-creation, adds to its analytic and existential ancestry an emphasis upon *holism*, *autonomy*, *experiential learning* and *democracy*. We discuss these humanistic working principles below, which I suggest provide an ethical base for the practice of Gestalt psychotherapy.

Holism suggests that a person's mental, physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual qualities are integral to everything they do and all they are. Consequently, an individual is best approached as a whole mind-body-spiritual being rather than reduced to one or more of their parts. As every thing is multi-faceted and multi-influenced, we are cautioned that there are no easy answers or simple solutions to human problems. In the practice of Gestalt I am encouraged to approach groups as organic entities, which, though composed of conscious and unconscious elements of the individuals within them, nevertheless express a life of their own. With individual clients I likewise look to the wider dynamic field they are embedded within and influenced by.

Autonomy supports the notion that given opportunity and resources, individuals are best placed to diagnose and resolve their own problems, for they know more about themselves than I or anyone else will ever do. As a Gestalt practitioner I watch and listen very carefully to what groups and individuals present, follow what emerges and share my observations while inquiring into the dynamics we create. In this way I attempt to act as a flexible resource, working alongside clients on their journey towards autonomy, personal responsibility and self-empowerment.

Experiential learning encourages us to meet life in an open and inquiring way, to attend to the unique nature of our present relationships and to experiment with becoming the whole of ourselves, in service of personal development. As a therapist I encourage people to take nothing for granted and to question everything. Through a focus upon what is unique, coupled with ongoing inquiry into our perceptions, beliefs and relationships, I seek to illuminate insight born from experience.

Democracy supports the notion that we are interdependent rather than independent, and suggests that reason and negotiation should inform all our decision-making and debate. In this vein, transparency rather than authoritative imposition and covert agendas should inform our social actions. Holding this in mind I work to negotiate a client-centred menu where everyone is involved in forming the 'how' and the 'what' of the experience on offer. Democracy also keeps me alert to the need for healthy 'I-Thou' relationships and causes me to be watchful of communication that slides towards an ego-centric 'I-I' or a reductionist 'I-It' stance to life, the self or others.

But why bother? What purpose does working in a humanistic way such as this serve? Well, personally, I see Gestalt's humanistic mode of working as conducive to self-actualisation, a state identified by Abraham Maslow that enables people to maintain peak performance throughout their lives and to distinguish themselves in their relative careers – a worthy aim. In his study of human potential Maslow identified the following qualities as linked to self-actualisation – namely an aptitude to:

- perceive reality efficiently
- tolerate uncertainty
- accept themselves and others for what they are
- be spontaneous in thought and behaviour
- maintain a good sense of humour
- be problem-centred rather than self-centred
- be highly creative
- be resistive to enculturation but not purposely unconventional
- demonstrate concern for the welfare of mankind
- be deeply appreciative of the basic experiences of life in a child-like way
- establish deep satisfying relationships with a few rather than court the friendship of many
- look at life philosophically and objectively

(Maslow 1967)

Self-actualisation, personal growth and therapy go hand in hand – as Perls recognized in this unpublished foreword for later editions of *Gestalt Therapy* (Perls, Hefferline & Goodman 1951/1994):

“...The overall accent, however, has changed from the idea of therapy to a gestalt concept of growth. I now consider that neurosis is not a sickness but one of several symptoms of growth stagnation. Other symptoms of growth stagnation are the need to manipulate the world and control madness, character distortion, reduction of the human potential, and lack of "response-ability," and most important of all, the production of holes in a personality”.

(F. S. Perls [August 1969] Cowichan Lodge, B.C)

From a humanistic perspective, I propose Gestalt practitioners promote self-actualisation through the cultivation of educational and healing relationships, where generative factors attendant to self-actualisation can be communicated, contacted and re-absorbed.

Because we learn to be human through relationships, before we can aspire towards self-actualisation we must experience a relationship where we can bond with a fellow being, build confidence and trust while appreciating the necessity to practice *reciprocity, accurate person perception* and *empathy*. Therapy, hopefully at the very least, develops such attributes and remedies our deficits in these domains.

Reciprocity - Reminds us that relationship is like a dance where we must move in tune

with others if we are to learn our part in the social choreography involved. People who have not fully anchored the principle of reciprocity feel driven to compete for air-time and attention. Feeling unseen, they desperately crave recognition and acceptance, and end up pushing those around them away, for they have not yet learnt such self-actualising principles as to *be problem-centred rather than self-centred; be spontaneous in thought and behaviour; look at life philosophically and objectively; to tolerate uncertainty.*

Accurate person perception - As children, first with our mother then within the family, we attempt to understand other people and to conceptualise the human condition. Some people arrive in adulthood without a clear picture of others, with a consequence that seeing only themselves they become heavily invested and preoccupied with their own dramas. Such individuals appear narcissistic and egotistical, for they haven't learnt to *accept themselves and others for what they are; to be resistive to enculturation but not purposely unconventional; be creative; to perceive reality efficiently.*

Empathy - Learn to take turns, to inhibit your impulses and to accurately perceive others, but if you relate without empathy you are destined to go through your social motions mechanically and humourlessly, for you haven't learnt to *be deeply appreciative of the basic experiences of life; establish deep satisfying relationships; have a good sense of humour; to demonstrate concern for the welfare of mankind.*

Zinker also says something more about what a client hopefully actualises and develops through engagement in Gestalt therapy:

"Through a creative involvement in the Gestalt process, it is my hope that a person:

- *moves toward greater awareness of himself - his body, his feelings, his environment;*
- *learns to take ownership of his experiences, rather than projecting them on others;*
- *learns to be aware of his needs and to develop skills to satisfy himself without violating others;*
- *moves towards a fuller contact with his sensations, learning to smell, taste, touch, hear and see - to savour all aspects of himself;*
- *moves towards experience of his power and the ability to support himself, rather than relying on whining, blaming or guilt-making in order to mobilise support from the environment;*
- *becomes sensitive to his surroundings, yet at the same time wears a coat of armour for situations which are potentially destructive or poisonous;*
- *learns to take responsibility for his actions and their consequences;*
- *feels comfortable with the awareness of his fantasy life and its expression.*

As the work progresses, the person flows more comfortably in the experience of his energy and uses it in a way which allows his completeness of functioning".

(Zinker 1978 p 96-97).

Remember, in Gestalt raising awareness is both the primary method and the primary outcome. This is the fundamental difference between Gestalt and most other psychotherapies. While in behavioural approaches the client's behaviour is changed by the therapist's manipulation of environmental stimuli, and while psychoanalysis brings the unconscious from repression into consciousness by analysing the transference relationship, in Gestalt the client is encouraged to make full use of his internal and external senses to generate self-responsibility and self-support. Gestalt therapy thus aims to help a client become self-supportive by raising awareness to the process of awareness! Behavioural therapists modify conditions by stimulus control, psychoanalysts by surfacing and talking about the problem, but Gestalt therapists attempt to bring self-realization and self-actualisation through here-and-now experiments in concentrated awareness directed towards the development of insight (Yontef 1993). At root, this awakening of conscious in a Zen-like way distinguishes Gestalt from other therapies.

Perhaps one last thing worth mentioning is 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.

Working principles

Humanism enlivens my ethical base. It keeps alive my respect and empathy for the human condition, encourages holistic inquiry and learning through experience, and sharpens my intention to work democratically in a way that empowers others. It cautions me to side-step becoming an expert and developing a belief that I know best, guides me towards being transparent regarding my motives, and leads me to encourage the self-actualisation of others while providing a notion of health to work towards where growth, self-support and authenticity, flow and integration, play their part.

References

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About the author

Paul Barber has co-designed and delivered Certificates in Therapeutic Community Practice, Masters in Change Agent Skills and Management Consultancy, and taught upon two Doctorates in Psychotherapy. As a facilitator he applies a holistic model derived from Gestalt which marries Humanism, Taoism and Group Analysis to coaching and organisational development. He is a Fellow of the Roffey Park Institute, a visiting Professor in Work-Based Learning at Middlesex University and the Faculty of Law and Business Studies in Novi Sad (Serbia). He staffs Practitioner Doctorates in Psychotherapy and in Public Works at the Metanoia Institute (London). His text 'Becoming a Practitioner Researcher: A Gestalt Approach to Holistic Inquiry' is recommended reading on several Masters in change and consulting, and upon numerous doctorate and research programmes.