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## **Therapeutic Democracy: The Roots and Potential Fruits of a Gestalt-Assisted Collaborative Inquiry**

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### **A B S T R A C T**

Gestalt therapy and Cooperative Inquiry (a method of action research) share significant roots: Martin Buber for one, and Kurt Lewin for another. They also share with Gestalt such categories as field theory, phenomenology, dialogue, and experimentation, among others. I write this paper partly as an invitation to Gestalt therapists to explore action methods such as cooperative inquiry, on the premise that when approached with intention the “between” can become the locus of a more relational spirituality. I propose that the principles of participatory or therapeutic democracy may be (as yet) underdeveloped in Gestalt practice and teaching, and tentatively suggest that Gestalt practitioners and trainees might “dip their toes” into collaborative waters as a useful training experience.<sup>1</sup>

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The only way to learn about cooperative inquiry is to do it.  
– Peter Reason (2003, p. 299)

### Introduction

After observing an avalanche of references to cancer among his clients around the time a relative of his was dying of the disease, Malcolm Parlett (1991) wondered if he had somehow prompted, in some unfathomable way, these reactions in his clients. Pondering the problem further, he then wrote that *cooperative inquiry* – a method of human research developed by John Heron (1971/1996) and Peter Reason (1989) – might be useful for deepening the understanding of field dynamics (synchronicities, parallel processes, and transpersonal events) that therapists often experience in close collaboration with their clients. Parlett asks:

Was there some mutual configuring of the shared field in which I was myself implicated, that led to a greater chance of certain issues being evoked? Do we influence others around us by what we are thinking about? Difficult though the issues are to research, they deserve to be carefully examined, if necessary by other methods of research (e.g., co-operative inquiry, Reason, 1989). (p. 69)<sup>2</sup>

We will return to Parlett's questions after outlining aspects of cooperative inquiry and describing a few tentative affinities and fundamental differences with Gestalt therapy. We will also explore the spirits of democracy and collaboration as they are practiced and perceived within these two distinct approaches to transformative praxis.

Co-inquiry differs from positivistic scientific research because central to its practice is an ethos that it does research *with* people, in contrast to conventional science which does research *on* people. Furthermore, most scientific research does not involve informants of decisions about the methodology or the design of the operational features (Heron, 1996, p. 9). Likewise, Gestalt therapy has slipped the moorings of the mechanistic science of its psychoanalytic forebears (Yontef and Jacobs, 2011). Gestalt therapist

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<sup>2</sup>By "other methods" does Parlett mean research methods outside of Gestalt experimentation? Or does he mean beyond mechanistic science altogether? In a later writing, he mentions fields as having "independent physical existence, albeit not one that can be measured within present scientific paradigms of science" (Parlett, 2005, p. 47). I shall go with "beyond traditional mechanistic and positivistic science."

J. Stevens (1977) describes a similar ethic in his personal practice of Gestalt therapy as “that you do *with* others not *to* them” (p. viii, emphasis added). The word “with” points to Gestalt therapy’s fundamentally collaborative and democratic ethos.

### *Roots*

The co-operative inquiry approach emerges from various, fields, disciplines, and historical sources – many of which cross over with Gestalt therapy. Co-inquiry overlaps most obviously with action research, stemming from the work of Kurt Lewin who developed field theory, one of the pillars Gestalt therapy (Heron, 1996, p. 7). They also overlap in Martin Buber and his affirmation of the “between” as the locus of spiritual endeavor; in the human potential movement (e.g., Maslow, Rogers, Perls); in the radical body and action-oriented therapies stemming from Claudio Moreno and Wilhelm Reich; in the encounter movement; and in transpersonal psychology (e.g., Wilber, 1995; Grof, 1985, 1988). Influenced by the human potential movement, which was as much educational as it was clinical (Taylor, 2007, p. 32), co-inquiry is organized toward transformational learning and new ways of knowing (see Reason, 1998, 2003). In a nutshell, as Heron (1996) states:

Co-operative inquiry involves two or more people researching a topic through their own experience of it, using a series of cycles in which they move between this experience and reflecting together on it. Each person is co-subject in the experience phases and co-researcher in the reflection phases. While this model has affinities with the account of action research and experiential learning arising from the work of Kurt Lewin (1952), its source, range of application and epistemology – as I have conceived these – are quite distinct and take it on to a different plain. (p. 1)

Co-inquiry is also influenced by feminist research and participatory philosophy (e.g., Skolimowski, 1994; Tarnas, 1991; Heron, 1996; Ferrer, 2002; Reason, 1998). One of the pioneers of the participatory view was Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), who was also an influence on Gestalt therapy and showed that perception itself is participatory. In the words of Reason (1998), the participatory view is

a world not of separate things but of relationships which we co-author. The world we experience as “reality” is subjective-objective, a co-creation that involves the primal givenness of the cosmos and human praxis. On this view, participation is an epistemological issue,

a way of knowing in which the knower and the known are distinct but not separate, in an unfolding unitive field of being. (p. 424)

For Reason participatory human inquiry is a discipline, much like Aikido or Zen Buddhism, and thus a “method or training” toward a new way of being and doing. As such, the participants “freely consent to abide by its practice rules” (p. 419), which are geared toward the flourishing and liberation of humans, communities, and the biosphere. Co-inquiry, then, is the establishment of individuals within liberationist learning-communities who are operating with a distinct set of parameters and practices. For the initiate it is useful to follow the rules; mature practitioners, having used the rules to develop an enhanced quality of attention and behavior, can move beyond them (p. 420).

Or, to quote and paraphrase Heron (1996), the inquiry is not simply into the given-world but into how the participatory mind shapes the given. This requires the tool of *critical subjectivity*, which must be preceded by a bit of house cleaning: “dismantling the warped rigidities of behavior, belief and emotional response” (p. 128) that can distort human subjectivity. When the inquiring human instrument is relatively clean (open, radically honest, and self-directed), and when there are various inquiry skills for keeping its subjectivity critical – in particular, through research cycling – it can then “manage with rigor its own consciousness. . . as it shapes its realities in transaction with the given” (p. 128). Co-inquiry is therefore a discipline for the development and practice of such skills.

The co-inquiry group is launched by one or two initiating facilitators who are interested in researching some aspect of the human condition: “They may wish to explore in depth their experience of certain states of consciousness, to assess the impact on their well-being of particular healing practices, and so on” (Reason, 2003, p. 209).<sup>3</sup> They invite other interested parties, often professionals, to inquire with them; and they must teach the participants the method of co-inquiry as they go. The tasks of the initiators in fostering a successful collaborative inquiry are threefold: 1. They must induct participants into the inquiry method (questioning, research, data collecting, face-to-face encounter as the research instrument); 2. They must create an atmosphere of engaged collaboration (e.g., all participants have a voice around needs, preferences, design, etc.); 3. They must foster an emotional climate wherein

<sup>3</sup>For example, our meeting in Australia is interested in group and individual wellness. We meet once a week and participate in three basic practices: 1. open awareness: a silent, open-eyed beholding of the meeting’s members, allowing the subjective-objective worldview to permeate consciousness; 2. personal sharing about our embodied lives, our trials and tribulations, our process of joining the group, etc.; 3. sounding: with percussion instruments, we tone and sound in a way that opens us up, with moving, swaying gestures, postures, etc.; we do these practices to see what effect they have on our group life and our lives outside of the meeting.

participants feel empowered to recognize, value, and own their triggers, impacts, and feelings without blame. They must cultivate the ability to give and receive corrective and creative feedback. Intimacy and radiant relationships are also fostered (e.g., Heron, 1996). In the co-inquiry approach, what gives the group its fundamental structure is the research cycling (e.g., planning, action, reflection, meaning-making; planning, action, reflection, etc.). Each of these facets can trigger intrapsychic or interpersonal distress and transpersonal and field phenomena. Each group must develop a way of managing, handling, ameliorating such distress. This means that the would-be initiators of co-inquiry groups need to be grounded in people-skills and group processes because co-inquiry depends on the “development of healthy human interaction in a face to face group” (Reason, 2003, p. 211).

#### *The Basic Difference*

To state the obvious: Gestalt therapy places great value on awareness and attention to the body, promotes qualitative-experiential-experimentation, is based in the field theory of Kurt Lewin, practices clinical phenomenology, and is dialogical-relational (e.g., Yontef, 2002). In its group form it has been described as “a community in which members can develop at the highest levels of human potential” and a “learning community” in which “people have gathered with a trained leader to solve personal and interpersonal problems” (Zinker, 1978, p. 156).

Co-active human inquiry promotes action taken for increasing knowledge and gaining skills, transformational learning, human and non-human flourishing; it is “an egalitarian, collective problem-solving activity rooted in interpersonally sensitive and mutually supportive dialogue” (Bradbury, Marvis, Neilsen, and Pasmore, 2008, p. 85); nor is it short on phenomenology (see Heron, 1996, 1998).<sup>4</sup> Thus, there seems to be some basic resonance with the general principles of Gestalt therapy since co-inquiry has an emphasis on dialogue and experimentation; however, there are vast and perhaps even intractable differences between these two field theory-based orientations.<sup>5</sup>

The first and most obvious intractable difference is that one orientation is a professional practice of *psychotherapy* in a therapist-client, economic, social arrangement; the onus of support is not on the client’s supporting the

<sup>4</sup>For Heron (1996), human flourishing is “desirable as an end in itself,” which he sees as a “mutually enabling balance between *autonomy* (determine and fulfil their own true needs); *co-operation* (mutual aid between autonomous persons in negotiating, decision-making and conflict resolution); and *hierarchy* (where someone takes appropriate responsibility for other persons for the sake of their future autonomy and co-operation). This state of being is integral to parenthood, education and many professions” (p. 127).

<sup>5</sup>Taylor (2007) says that Gestalt therapy’s understanding and explanation of the formation of ego consciousness is practically useful and appreciated in participatory inquiry methods, e.g., action research, cooperative inquiry, relational spirituality (p. 66).

therapist, and therefore it is not (nor should it be) mutually supportive. The other orientation is a practice of *action research* – among peers – so that the basic social contract and set-up are different; there is an onus of mutual care (Lahood, 2010b). Thus, all participants shoulder the burden of care for the outcome of the whole inquiry cycle and the interpersonal health of the group. Nevertheless, aside from their natural differences there are some intriguing overlaps and, in principle, each orientation could be used gainfully to augment the other.<sup>6</sup>

Taking Parlett's nod to *co-inquiry* as a resource for Gestalt research, I propose that the two cultures can serve each other in the following ways. *Gestalt therapy* can: 1. augment and empower collaborative inquiry with its skill in fostering dialogue; 2. aid in creating an open emotional climate; 3. develop fine-tuned awareness; and 4. be utilized to work-through the intrapsychic and interpersonal distress stirred up by the process of co-inquiry. *Co-inquiry* can: 1. add to Gestalt therapy in terms of researching the subtle aspects of the human condition, e.g., Parlett's (1991) question regarding the influence of thought; 2. immerse and deepen the Gestalt therapist's lived experience of collaborative praxis and therapeutic democracy; 3. offer a learnable skill set useful to Gestalt therapists (see below). Of course, these are provisional statements and would require testing through experiential collaborative research with Gestalt therapists to corroborate them. As with Gestalt therapy, to learn about it one must do it (Reason, 2003, p. 229). The working definitions of collaboration and democracy need to be clarified, as well as how they are used differently in Gestalt therapy and co-inquiry communities.

### Personal Background

I became interested in Gestalt therapy in the late 1980s, which led to two years of Gestalt training, an extended stay in Esalen, living in and around a Gestalt community in New Zealand for 10 years, and individual Gestalt

<sup>6</sup>According to this author (Lahood, 2010a), "cooperative inquiry is not to be mistaken for psychotherapy [although] some skill in co-handling unfinished business stirred in the inquiry is important and warranted" (p. 137). Moreover, central to the co-inquiry approach is "the creation of a climate in which emotional states can be identified, so that distress and tension aroused by the inquiry can be openly accepted and processed, and joy and delight in each other can be freely expressed" (Heron, 1996, p. 63). Therefore, the culture of co-inquiry has a transformational-change orientation to it. Later, when outlining the tasks of the initiating facilitator and the "emotional and interpersonal strand," Heron describes an array of therapeutic approaches that could be called-up to help manage distress: bodywork, breath-work, psychodrama, centering, discharge/catharsis, artwork, story-telling, work with music: "The initiating facilitator also needs to help parties clearly differentiate between actual present-time issues, and projected unfinished business from the past" (p. 71). All this surely has a deep resonance with the wider therapeutic culture in which Gestalt therapy is embedded.

psychotherapy and supervision by Gestalt practitioners. I also developed a fascination for transpersonal research and was drawn to the work of Stanislav Grof. This approach to healing and exploration had a strong self-research base; according to Heron (1998), Grof's (1988) "holotropic therapy was perhaps on the threshold" of a "participatory, co-operative inquiry" (p. 59). People take it in turns to breathe deeply to evocative music; catharsis and bodywork are completed with artwork and a postmodern meaning-making, check-in circle where people can make sense of the experience in their own way.

As a group event, holotropic therapy can be construed as a healing ritual process (Lahood, 2007a), which seems to generate subtle, spiritual, and synchronistic phenomena (see Grof, 1988). It is practiced against a backdrop of Hindu-Buddhist influenced transpersonal theory (Grof, 1985; Wilber 1995), although more recently Grof's research has been transplanted into participatory-philosophy (e.g., Tarnas, 1991; Ferrer, 2002). It can also be framed as an action cycle for acquiring four types of knowledge, following Heron and Reason (2008): 1. *propositional knowledge* (learned from books, lectures, etc.); 2. *experiential knowledge* (e.g., altered states, catharsis, somatic blocks, self-generated healing); 3. *presential knowledge* that emerges from the former (e.g., making art, story-telling); 4. *practical knowledge* (learning "how to" skills). (I have facilitated more than 200 transpersonal inquiry/healing groups of this kind.) According to Grof (1985), this approach found strong parallels in Gestalt therapy; likewise, Perls (1969) claimed that Grof's transpersonal research confirmed the "death centre" in his theory of neuroses (p. 153).

Soon after training with Grof, I met John Heron in the early 1990s. I was interested in his view on the transpersonal, so I attended his person-centered "cosmic psychology" workshop in New Zealand and later joined

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<sup>7</sup>Yontef (2002) has criticized the kind of degenerate charisma enacted by some Gestalt group leaders: "Another practice that is inconsistent with the relational principles discussed here is the presence of the therapist in a manner that encourages charismatic or narcissistic elevation at the expense of the patient. The therapist or trainer in this pattern solicits or encourages his or her idealization, and the patient or trainee projects competence, wisdom, and goodness on the therapist with a concomitant diminishment of self. The patient or trainee then can bask in the light of the therapist's magnificence. The form or style of the therapist or trainer doing this varies. It can be confrontive, seductive, rescuing, empathic, creative, and so forth. The problem is the nature of the relationship, the nature of the role the therapist plays in relation to the patient" (p. 26).

We have, however, defined *charisma* as "characterized by creative spontaneity and depth," and *sacred* as "a combination of hallowed, holy, blessed, whole, generative, engaging, nourishing, nurturing, intimate, inclusive, numinous, awesome, mysterious" (Heron and Lahood, 2008, p. 440). In my meetings and workshops, there are regular rounds of charismatic experimentation and charismatic risk-taking, in which participants co-design rituals to share spontaneity, creativity and charisma; co-create it for and with each other by centering on their available light (e.g., wellness, strengths, openness, humor); and embody spiritual values and participatory knowing. This has balanced out over time with people also taking ownership of distress, competition, envy, authoritarianism, and self-centeredness. It appears that the ownership of such material increases the openness of charismatic climate.

his ongoing cooperative inquiry (“the wavy”) group (Heron and Lahood, 2008). Concomitant with my time in the inquiry group (which was oriented toward person-centered research into the sacred and into shared charisma),<sup>7</sup> I initiated several inquiry groups in New Zealand, England, and Australia. During this time, I undertook doctoral studies in social anthropology on the subject of transpersonal events in childbirth (e.g., Lahood, 2006). As part of these studies, I explored the rise of the American counter-culture of the 1960s and the connection between the transpersonal movement, self-spirituality, and the New Age (Lahood, 2008, 2010a, 2010b). Since “jumping the ditch” in 2007 (a colloquialism for moving from New Zealand to Australia), I have been involved in a long-term co-inquiry group nicknamed “the conference of the bees,” an experimental collaborative community with a proposed life span of 7 years. This group, which began with a small action research cycle involving three other persons, was based on “detaching with love from authoritarian friends and groups”: many in the Byron Bay area of Australia have “done time” in what anthropologists would call new religious movements and cult formations (e.g., Rajneesh-ism), and many more are influenced by Eastern and New Age beliefs. There are now 18 persons engaged in the inquiry, which has multiple inquiry threads.

Anthropology, we recall, is the study of human beings and the power of culture; anthropologists live in cultures where they write (therapeutically) about all kinds of things, although a common goal among anthropologists and sociologists is to illuminate the patterns of power and oppression operating in culture. I have become interested in the current globalization of New Age monism (as a force for oppression), and what I think of as *relational spirituality* as an antidote to its spiritual narcissism (see Lahood 2007b, 2008, 2010a, 2010b). To ground this in Gestalt thinking, Perls (1969) says that “the difference between self actualizing and self-image actualizing is very important” (p. 21). In other words, everyday narcissism is a process of self-objectification (Almass, 1996) – an escape from the immediate present experience “by using the filter of thought and self definition” (Todres, 2007, p. 159). Over the past three years, I have returned to the Gestalt fold and retrained with a Masters degree to gain greater experience of *relational therapy* (which is not the same as relational spirituality).

Because I have lived in both Gestalt and co-inquiry cultures on and off for twenty years, coupled with doing various forms of spiritual and transpersonal research, I feel in a position to write about Gestalt and co-inquiry as an insider to both approaches. As an anthropologist would do, I rely on my lived experience and participant/observation as data. I do not, however, claim mine to be an authoritative position; my experience is too narrow, located as it is in local-global culture. Because of time spent in both cultures and “work” in their

respective cultures, I share the following observation: the Gestalt community may have something – perhaps something subtle – yet to learn about the experiential gradations of collaboration and democracy in group life, which could be applied to therapy, group, and organizational work. By reporting on this observation, I by no means discount the many Gestalt therapists who are supportive of greater democracy and collaboration within the therapeutic encounter. There are, of course, therapists with authoritarian and narcissistic styles, but the fault does not lie in Gestalt theory. I turn now to discuss how the intriguing topics of collaboration and democracy can serve to delimit the power of authoritarian, narcissistic, or charismatic leadership.

### **Divergence in Collaboration**

I am not arguing here that Gestalt therapy is not collaborative; it was born of collaboration among Fritz and Laura Perls and Paul Goodman (Yontef and Jacobs, 2011). It values both the principles of collaboration and democracy (e.g., Miller, 1997). Indeed, the Gestalt literature (old and new) reminds us often that Gestalt is a collaborative (Zinker, 1978, p. 157) and egalitarian-democratic venture (Lichtenberg, 2012). I agree with the Gestalt community in its belief that it is collaborative; however, what *collaboration* means in co-inquiry terms is careful attention to conjoint or participatory decision-making, the harvest of which (to borrow from E. Polster and M. Polster, 1974) could be summed up as a “sociological step beyond personal ‘growth’ into a new communal climate” (p. 24). This communal climate and egalitarian atmosphere is ushered in by an initiating facilitator, who then hands the inquiry method over to the participants and becomes a peer member of the group. The radical practice of participatory decision-making can be construed as therapeutic democracy, which I observe to be deeply reparative for those persons who have lost their discrimination, judgment, inner authority, and knowing by displacing it all onto authoritarian leaders.

Inquiry group decision-making, to put it into Gestalt parlance, is all about *contact*, and it could be argued that working democratically with one another can modulate our contact styles (cf. Joyce and Sills, 2004). According to Sylvia Crocker (1999), a “decision-making voice” (p. 54) is a contact process. It is also a particular type of “boundary work” useful for those who have accepted “authoritative definitions of what is right, good or beautiful” (Clarkson, 1989, p. 138). Thus initiating facilitators, working with a Gestalt and relational sensitivity, could lend important skills and knowledge to the process of co-inquiry.

It would be fair to say that cooperation in Gestalt therapy emerges to a large degree from the therapeutic skills of the therapist. For example, as

Joseph Zinker (1978) states in his classic text:

The Gestalt therapist learns a variety of methods for harnessing the group's energy into an integrated system of creative work, a system which is pointed and directional. This cooperative effort requires the group's acceptance of and regard for its individual members, as well as the leader's special skills in converting the group's talents and resistances into a sense of a unified community. (p. 177)

Yes, it is collaborative, but its normative collaboration is born from the skills of the therapist, whereas collaboration in co-inquiry issues from a different principle: it is born from the group decision-making process.

### **Therapeutic Democracy**

The intention here is to raise further awareness around the notion of therapeutic *democracy*. The Gestalt community rightly, I think, appraises itself as democratic. For example, according to Lichtenberg (2012), "Gestalt therapy embodies commitment to democratic and egalitarian functioning of persons in the therapy room" (p. 175). He goes on to beseech Gestalt therapists to strengthen the conversations of everyday life with "the pulse democracy and egalitarianism" (p. 175) and implies that Gestalt therapists are in a unique position to bring more democracy to the world. And Miller (1997) states:

Let me make a case for why I think that Gestalt therapy may be uniquely positioned for this restorative work to bring out the soul of psychotherapy. First, it has a basis in existential phenomenology. Among other things, this means that it emphasizes the relational intersubjectivity of our power to meet with and engage otherness in a democratic collaboration, called contact, which constructs and gives form to our experience of reality. (p. 66)

It would appear that contact (perhaps the central pillar of Gestalt) is, for the Gestalt therapist, a democratic collaboration. But again there are, I believe, gradations of democracy or experiments in deep collaboration as yet to be properly researched and lived in the Gestalt community. To my mind, a group of Gestalt therapists is more likely to display a greater sense of the democratic attitude than, perhaps, group of court-ordered patients in a substance abuse recovery scenario. A group of seasoned co-inquirers will likely show greater levels of enacted democracy than a group of Gestalt students.

### Democracy and the Experiment

We have established that Gestalt therapy and co-inquiry share common ground; each, in its respective way, is engaged in the art and science of human research, and each orients its participants toward flourishing, thriving, and wellness. According to Stevens (1971), “many of the basic awareness experiments exemplify the scientific method of observation, hypothesis, testing against reality through experimentation etc.” (p. 135). And co-inquiry is all about *research into the human condition* (Heron, 1971, 1998) through designing, taking action, and reflecting together.<sup>8</sup>

There is, however, a natural difference in how each approach goes about it; this difference will be examined through the lens of the *experiment*. The subject of therapist distress (authoritarianism, narcissism, and usurpation of power), and how it can potentially seep into the therapeutic relationship, will also be addressed; Gestalt therapists are well aware of the potential for such distress to occur (e.g., Yontef, 1993; Staemmler, 1997; Lichtenberg, 2012). A cautionary word will be given on what I think of as an authoritarian-narcissistic-power process. A *partial* safeguard in the inquiry method against this degenerate charismatic pattern can be found by giving greater attention to the democratic process. Here is what we used in inquiry groups in New Zealand and Australia:

As a professed peer-group, our model of decision-making seeks a creative balance between hierarchy, autonomy, and co-operation. It is open to anyone to exercise a hierarchical or leadership initiative and propose some activity or direction for the group as a whole. Issues to do with the proposal are discussed, with time for each member to clarify their [*sic*] autonomous response; a vote is taken with arms more or less up, more or less down, or horizontal to indicate degree of support, degree of rejection, or ambivalence. If there is a minority of those who reject or are ambivalent, they speak to their position. This may cause some of the majority to change their position, in which case another arm vote is taken. Once unchanging positions are established, and the minority acknowledge they feel heard and understood and are open to accede to the majority, the majority vote holds. In our decisions, we are committed to celebrate diversity and variety in what individuals or subgroups may choose to do, as well as corporate and concerted actions. (Heron and Lahood, 2008, p. 442)

<sup>8</sup>My personal engagement has been around the issues of embodied spirituality, relational spirituality, researching the relationship between the human and the hypothesized divine, and co-creating wellness by shared charisma. The underlying focus of the inquiry has been into recognizing and shedding personal and cultural narcissism.

Returning to Stevens (1971): I imagine that he would appreciate this practice, because in 1971 he was exhorting his readers (I assume Gestaltists and students) toward a greater democratic process:

[L]et [your students] realize the difference between the democracy you preach and the tyranny you probably teach (benevolent or not) through your actions"; [and] "a lot of time is usually spent teaching about the mechanics of democracy. . . usually much less time is spent on the really fundamental process of democracy: that everyone has a say in the government (group) and that all these different views are respected as they come together to work out some sort of solution through open and reasonable discussion. Usually almost no time at all is spent in actually *practicing* democracy. Democracy is based on the idea of communication instead of merely power [and] authority." (p. 135, emphasis in original)<sup>9</sup>

This was written over 40 years ago, and Gestalt therapy has evolved its therapeutic style since then; it is highly communicative, conversational, and dialogical. In its relational-turn, there is greater emphasis on I-Thou, intersubjectivity, compassion, kindness, and "empathetic inquiry" (Yontef, 1999, p. 10). Because it has moved away from the individualistic, charismatic, and confrontational style of Perlsian Gestalt (see Yontef, 1993), Gestalt therapy can be deemed to be more democratic; therefore, the following segment can be read as my adding another voice to an already established theoretical project of consciousness raising, as in the *conscientização* of Freire (1970) around the problem of power, authority and degenerate charisma.

### **Distortions in Charismatic Power**

According to Saner (1989), Gestalt therapy has been the recipient of a subtle and overlooked cultural bias in the form American individualism or "overdone individualism" and a super valuing of taking care of myself, of individual identity, of emotional independence; and what he calls a "calculative involvement with organizations" (p. 59). Saner stresses here the need for a *corrective* experience (see Parlett, 1991, p. 69). It has also been argued that the cultures of the New Age and transpersonal psychology are somewhat narcissistic; their self-spirituality is easily appropriated by the individualistic Cartesian ego (Lasch, 1977; Ferrer, 2002; Lahood, 2010b). Therefore, the

<sup>9</sup>On an historical note: at the same time (1971) that Stevens was writing about democratic principles, Heron was experimenting with the rudimentary principles of cooperative inquiry.

practice of co-inquiry and participatory decision-making could well serve the relational-turn in Gestalt therapy, as a further corrective experience to extreme individualism and its privatized ego.

Experimentation in Gestalt now emerges from a finely tuned relationship between client and therapist which, when it is practiced well, is an exquisitely sensitive and co-created enactment to promote greater awareness – which is deemed curative. The Gestalt experiment, not unlike co-inquiry's "taking action," is designed to promote new cognitive, emotional, and behavioral experiences. For example, early as 1978, Zinker stated:

The process of negotiating with the client in designing an experiment and the client's willingness to participate in it is called consensus. . . . Consensus is the cornerstone of the work of some of my colleagues. They need a clear agreement, a mini-contract, with the client to execute a particular task; at every critical stage of the work, the therapist makes it clear to the client that that he can either agree to try something new or agree not to do so. (p. 131)

This perspective is to be applauded but, as Gary Yontef (2002) observed, "some Gestalt therapists do not practice inclusion in their work with patients," and some still attempt the role of therapist as "change agent trying to cure the patient" (p. 25). Furthermore, agreeing to something, with all due respect to Zinker and colleagues, may not be fully collaborative and democratic because of the inherent power imbalance in the hierarchical therapeutic configuration. This is why I confess to getting a bit confused by the Gestalt literature when it claims to be egalitarian, democratic, and collaborative while there is such a power-division in the mix; the best I can do at this stage (acknowledging that my experience may be too narrow) is to say, "It is, and it is not."

Reflexivity (the understanding that all beliefs and views are biased) also plays a part in the development of an experiment. Nevertheless, as Buber expressed years ago, only one is there for the healing (Jacobs, 1989); therefore, the onus of reflexivity is on the therapist. As Rich Hycner (1989) states, the client's responsibility is not to build a relational bridge where the therapist is (p. 108); there is more asked of the therapist: "This is one of the normative limitations of mutuality in therapy" (p. 137). These observations seem like accurate common sense: psychotherapy is not a peer process and is limited in terms of mutual care. As indicated in Crocker (2005), the therapeutic encounter is one in which neither the therapist nor client know what will happen next, but one of them is grounded in the knowledge of having done this process many times before – and knowledge is power.

In my experience as participant/observer in Gestalt groups, some (at least)

of these experiments are pushed into play by the Gestalt therapist because of the enthusiasm, charisma, know-how, and authority vested in the group leader by students (the student, if she has the support, can say “no” or “yes” to the experiment). There are gradations offered by the therapist, and while it can be argued that such experiments are a “co-creation” – I simply have not seen an overt, democratic decision-making process (like the one described above) – I have observed that this lack of authorship on the part of the student can sometimes stir up “resistance” in some, or acquiescence or compliance in others. Gestalt therapists can rightly argue that “resistance is natural and we can converse about it,” but only if the resistance is supported and brought into open discussion in the first place. I also observed a practitioner attempt powerfully to push into play an experiment that was non-consultative (an opinion that did not get air time, in my view), poorly-timed, wide of the mark, murkily motivated, and so shaming of the client that it blew up in the therapist’s face: the man left the training and did not return. To his credit, the therapist later owned that he had been “off”; that his was an example of poorly executed experimentation.

Stevens’s call for greater democracy, referred to earlier, finds an echo in the *significantly later* writings of Yontef and those of Frank-M. Staemmler. Yontef (1993) states (in his introduction to field theory) that at the start of a group some trainees are ready to work with the trainer and others are not (*they* need to observe and feel their way a bit more). Doing work early focuses on the sharp figure of the individual go-getter which, according to Yontef (1993), “enhances the charismatic quality of the group leader at the expense of individual and group needs. . . . Such an approach meets the narcissistic needs of the therapist rather than the needs of the group” (p. 307). Thus, the more able-to-work trainees can create a dominant subgroup, which enhances the leader’s charisma and feeds his narcissism (but is detrimental to the trainee who projects qualities onto the therapist) – all the while that they bask in the therapist’s glory (Yontef, 1993), also a form of narcissistic supply for these trainees. I am tentatively suggesting here that a more intentionally modeled collaborative atmosphere could be a practical and skillful means to reduce the distorting pattern Yontef is alerting us to.

The hierarchical power dynamic of trainer-student (especially in institutes of learning and accreditation), by its very structure, can confer charismatic power onto the leader, owner, trainer (cf. Weber, 1947), which again means that clients may be projecting qualities onto the trainer while diminishing themselves. In the worst case scenario of this cautionary diagnostic, then, there will be a diminished self (after Yontef, 1993) making pseudo decisions, an inflated therapist, and likely no authentic collaborative/democratic process. The inherent structure of the therapist-client hierarchy is both functional and

necessary; I am certainly not implying here that that therapeutic arrangement is inappropriate. It simply means that we Gestalt therapists must strive to understand and become aware of the dangers of its possible distortions.

Increased communication, Stevens (1971) says, "will reduce your need to impose order by authority, and reduce the student's [client's] need to rebel" (p. 135). Compulsive and impotent rebelliousness, it seems to me, can be the product of childhood wounding turned into a habitual defensiveness, which can carry over into the therapeutic relationship as something like transference or unfinished business. However, standing up to, and rebelling against, present time – *unaware* – authoritarianism (meaning: lack of democracy, lack of voice on issues that impact me, lack of collaboration, the usurping of the available light and charisma) appears to me a contactful response to a subtle form of therapeutic tyranny.

Nevertheless, if the authoritarian therapist<sup>10</sup> has only a superficial understanding of this subtle power dynamic, and can only perceive a person's authentic challenge as unfinished business, coming from a characterological reservoir of archaic distress or an insinuated history of "issues with authority," then we are in troubled waters. The therapist is ducking the issue; his appropriate therapeutic authority may have degenerated into subtle authoritarianism (control, defensiveness, exploitation, narcissism, dogmatism), perhaps defaulting to an inferred "greater knowledge of unfinished business," in order to insinuate a subtle pathology into the psyche of the student. On this matter, according to one anthropologist, psychoanalysts have "fetishized" the unconscious to their advantage by undermining the "immediate self-understanding and praxis of others" through an appeal to "objectivity," which is insinuated into the consciousness of the patient. The personal origins of this so-called "objectivity" within the analyst remain "masked" (Jackson, 1989, p. 47).

In a similar vein, Staemmler (1997) also warns his readers of the misuse of power in therapy: "The question of power in psychotherapy is the question of who possesses the power to confer meanings. In other words: who is able to push through their own interpretation, even against the resistance of another" (p. 42). He then cites sociologist Max Weber (who also famously analyzed *charisma* as a supernatural power granted to a human being, a gift which gives the recipient charismatic authority): "Power is any chance within a social relationship to succeed with one's own will, if necessary against opposition, no matter what this chance is based on" (p. 42). In this scenario,

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<sup>10</sup>Lichtenberg (2012), drawing from the "powerfully diagnostic" work, *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford, 1950), speaks of how ordinary people can become "potential fascists" (p. 176) and what personality factors add to the "acceptance of anti-democratic living and relating" (p. 175).

the more the trainee clamors for her democratic and human rights and resists the therapist's or group leader's subtle process of power-over, the more some therapists infer intrapsychic or interpersonal damage, unfinished business, or transference; this is, I believe, what Staemmler is saying. Stevens (1971) states – and the more relationally-oriented Gestalt therapists would surely agree – that anything we can do to promote communication, dialogue, and interactivity will help students to learn; I would add that any way the therapist can increase students' participation in democratic processes will empower them, and they will be less likely to take up a defensive or rebel position.

Because co-inquiry has attempted to make democracy – an overt experiential voting process – a cornerstone of its practice, I believe that Gestalt therapists might well benefit from a concerted dip into these intentionally collaborative waters. As Yontef (2002) points out, Gestalt therapy has a tradition of assimilating other systems into its own, including object-relations and Buddhist mindfulness meditation. And as Reason (1998) notes, there are 35 different forms of participatory inquiry identified throughout the world at this time (p. 429); thus, it seems reasonable to assume that some healthy meeting between Gestalt therapy and human co-research could occur, perhaps begetting a hybrid form.<sup>11</sup> Given their shared roots, it is possible that a specialized “Gestalt Assisted Collaborative Inquiry” could emerge; given Gestalt's innovative approach, attempts at such collaborative research in some form or another might already be under way.

The fruits of the therapy configuration *differ* from the harvest of a co-inquiry configuration; both have their natural limitations. Obviously, clients and patients simply want a good therapist to care for them and may have no desire to participate in a full-blown inquiry. According to Parlett (2005), “close professional relationships, like other intense one-on-one relationships, are wonderful models for seeing field phenomena at work. The whole co-regulated, mutually constructed, relational field has distinct qualities; it changes over time; it is different from being the sum of the parts (the two selves); a third entity comes into existence, with a life of its own” (p. 58). So imagine, if you will, the nature of the third entity when 16 persons are mutually co-shaping the direction of the inquiry as peer or professional inquirers engaged in transformational research together.

### **The Fertile Ground of Collaborative Decision Making**

Nevertheless, the democratic decision-making practice of co-inquiry itself can stir up unfinished business and something like therapeutic transference or “research counter-transference” (Heron, 1998). If managed appropriately,

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<sup>11</sup>Gestalt therapy has been described as a “fully integrative hybrid” (Horton, 2006, p. 237).

this stirred-up material can become healthy grist for the therapeutic mill and hopefully for reparative events – openness and radiant relationships. *If* a group of Gestalt therapists decided, for example, to participate in a relational co-inquiry over 5 or 9 days (“co-research in the realm of the ‘between’” [after Heron and Lahood, 2008]; or “attuning to and co-actively engaging the ‘Eternal Thou’” [after Hycner, 1988]; or “how to be present to and interact with a significant mystery” [after Crocker, 1999]; or how to get a client support from a “trans-organismic” field [after Philip Brownell, 2012, p. 99]), *then* we would, in my view, have all the ingredients for a deeply transformative, enlivening, educational, and no doubt chaotic event – the harvest of which, it is hoped, would be greater wellness, insight, or transpersonal attunement, as well as a set of inquiry skills learned “on the hop.” I would imagine that the principles that cohere in the cultures of collaborative inquiry, action research, and relational spirituality could be easily assimilated by the Gestalt therapist, giving her a valuable training experience perhaps to integrate into her practice with clients.

In therapeutic democracy or collaborative decision-making, our values and preferences, our ability or inability to make authentic choices, collaborate genuinely, etc., come into the foreground; often underlying these values is our unfinished business, contact style, social and familial conditioning, emotional turmoil, or wounding from past authority figures in our struggles to become healthily autonomous.<sup>12</sup> To be volitional we must be visible, and to be visible and volitional with others so engaged is to become collaborative (cf. Taylor, 2007). Yet as therapists (and non-therapists) we know something of the human condition, and we see how easy it is to hide and remain invisible. We know that persons, having being wounded, want to go at it alone, and that for some of us our childhood wants, preferences, and needs were met with treacherous manipulation or ridicule, or simply not met at all; it is not easy for some of us to be visibly volitional – and therefore collaborative.

### **Decisions and Somatic Memory**

In the movement toward congruent, non-dominating, non-confluent, non-compliant, and genuinely cooperative decision-making, something like

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<sup>12</sup>Spretnak (1995) speaks of an autonomy beyond the dualistic Cartesian ego, embedded in a dynamic web of relationships with other beings and within being-as-such.

<sup>13</sup>Sometimes people are triggered and with activated distress patterns; the inquiry group must turn its attention to this dynamic as a matter of healthy practice. In an ideal cycle, the group would stop with the distressed person and seek a contract for therapeutic work later on (if the person could manage the distress); or, if the distress needed immediate attention, we would seek a contract to do a piece of work there and then. Here, all the skills, approaches, and understanding of the Gestalt practitioner could be called upon for sensitive co-creative work. We could then return to the inquiry cycle.

therapeutic transference can occur at subtle neurobiological levels.<sup>13</sup> Bradbury et al. (2008) combine the work of neurobiologist Antonio Damasio with attachment theory, stating that Damasio (1994) has shown that emotions are integral to decision; making every authentic choice is also a form of emotional expression. A volitional being is one who is busily making decisions and choices based on preferences. Yet significantly, according to Damasio, these “preferences are built up over time in part by the accumulation of somatic markers, that is, changes in body states (heart rate, muscle contractions)” (cited in Bradbury et al., p. 84); these are stored in memory and then re-experienced as feelings when similar situations re-stimulate them. Bradbury et al. state: “As the individual encounters new events that evoke memories of old ones, the act of doing so re-engages not only the cognitive memory of them but also their associated somatic markers” (p. 84), and these are experienced as feelings:

Somatic markers vary in the valence of the feelings they induce. Experiences with rewarding or adaptive outcomes generate somatic markers that produce positive feelings and encourage further engagement in similar scenarios. Those with negative outcomes generate somatic markers that produce negative feelings and encourage fight, flight or other defensive reactions to similar scenarios. Thus new events in a person’s ongoing experience constantly evoke somatic markers that remind the individual in the exquisite shorthand of feelings, and often subconsciously [out of awareness] and far more quickly than conscious reasoning, of the quality of the experience of similar events in the past. Those feelings in turn provide us with our preferences and priorities. To wit: “Emotions steer the decision-making process based on the net valence of past experience.” (Bradbury et al., p. 84)

A slowed-down decision-making process carefully involving the whole group (itself a possible Gestalt group experiment) in what action to take together (experiment) in relation to the emergent figure can yield important process material from intrapsychic, interpersonal, and transpersonal domains. Reflecting on this together opens further *gestalten* and directions for further action and reflection. Each cycle has its season; the harvest of such collaborative fruits can be a confirmation of human community-in-action and the kind of ritual equality that leads at times to a joyful opening, and to a kind of positive attachment or bonding (flood of positive somatic markers) that anthropologist Victor Turner (1969) called *communitas*.

The whole collaborative inquiry process can be construed as a relational spirituality practice which, when it works well, enables a profound kind of

spiritual rebirth:

This rebirthing is relational – consequent upon the co-creative resonance among us all. And it empowers us to come into the presence between. In short: immanent spirit becomes manifest, through collaborative action, as relational and situational sacred presence. Participation in this presence engenders a liberating wholeness, a personal regeneration – which is given expression amidst the practicalities of everyday life and work, empowering whole relations with others. (Heron and Lahood 2008, pp. 439-449)

As Perls (1969) once said, “To suffer one’s own death and be reborn is not easy” (n.p.). To achieve the kind of participatory/relational rebirth we are talking about is not easy either. It may sound simple, but it is at times a Promethean task, fraught with all the tensions of the human condition. Furthermore, co-inquiry is prone to the difficulties common to group formation; there are various emotional needs at different stages in the group’s life (e.g., inclusion, control, intimacy). The inquiry can also get lost, lose its intention, get sidetracked and “bushwhacked,” or veer toward destruction; and it has a potential shadow. Peer-pressure, narcissism, willful individualism, consensus collusion, messianic paring, etc., can all be present in the inquiry; they are, after all, part of the human condition (Reason, 1998, 2003). Here the skills of Gestalt therapy, along with validity procedures and research skills that belong to the inquiry proper, can be used to enhance the creative group cycle.

### **Fruits: The Bird Inquiry**

We return here to Parlett’s (1991) questions around cancer, shared thought, and participatory fields in the context of a brief account of a rudimentary participatory inquiry held in Australia. The idea was to set up an action cycle where we engaged in experiments, to see if we could get some feedback from some of the co-dwellers of local environment – the birds. We saw this as a bit of do-it-yourself research into the power of communal intention: How do the birds respond to our thinking about them in a certain creative, generous, and I-Thou way, if at all?

Following is some of the provisional knowledge that supports such an inquiry. Buber (who was influenced by Hassidic mysticism) believed that the I-Thou extended to nature; therefore, there is a human and non-human “between,” and an encounter with rocks, trees birds, and bees. In Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) phenomenology, “I am part of the world and that the world is an extension of my body. Body and world imply each other and are of the same

nature"; this relationship was the "primordial ground of all our awareness, a kind of prolongation of the body . . . *the flesh of the world* (cited in von Eckartsberg, 1998, p. 12, emphasis in original). According to ecopsychologist Theodore Roszak (2001), Gestalt therapy was "the first therapy to use the word 'ecology' to describe the spontaneous, adjustive power of the organism in its environment" (p. 230). Gestalt therapy reaches out to, and makes contact with, the environment. This kind of kinship with bird, plant, and animal life perhaps belongs to what is now broadly called *shamanism* in the Western world (a strong force in New Age religion) (Morris, 1996).

Anthropologist David Abram (1997), working with Merleau-Ponty's participatory approach, is critical of the American counter-culture's version of shamanism. Because of anthropology's "inability to discern the shaman's allegiance to nonhuman nature" (Abram, p. 21), a trend has developed in which indigenous "shamanism" as mimicked has come to mean a kind of psychotherapy where insight and altered states are sought for healing. (Interesting, it has also been claimed that Perls was a shaman [e.g., Naranjo, 1978]). While noble in its aim, Abram believes that this Westernized shamanism misses the mark: "For the source of stress lies in the relation *between* the human community and the natural landscape" (p. 21, emphasis in original) and is therefore not wholly located in the Cartesian body. He also describes shamanism in this way:

The traditional magician cultivates an ability to shift out of his or her common state of consciousness precisely in order to make contact with the other organic forms of sensitivity and awareness with which human existence is intertwined. Only by temporarily shedding the accepted perceptual logic of his culture can the sorcerer hope to enter into relationship with other species on their own terms; only by altering the common organization of his senses will he be able to enter into rapport with the multiple nonhuman sensibilities that animate the local landscape. It is this, we might say, that defines the shaman: the ability to readily slip out of the perceptual boundaries that demarcate his or her particular culture – boundaries reinforced by social customs, taboos, and most importantly, the common speech or language – in order to make contact with, and learn from, the other powers in the land. His magic is precisely this heightened receptivity to the meaningful solicitations – songs, cries, gestures – of the larger, more-than-human field. (p. 9)

I have a well-socialized self, so to speak; I know the rules, the language, and the perceptual logic of my Cartesian culture in which subject is maintained at

a distance from object. But some, perhaps most, Gestalt therapists may find such an experiment a little "out there." I do not carry a self-image of myself as a shaman, but could we perhaps depict ourselves as a fledgling forum for the exploration of some sort of co-shamanism? Because, as Abram (1997) suggests:

The traditional or tribal shaman. . . acts as an intermediary between the human community and the larger ecological field, ensuring that there is an appropriate flow of nourishment, not just from the landscape to the human inhabitants but from the human community back to the local earth. . . . To some extent every adult in the community is engaged in this process of listening and attuning to the other presences that surround and influence daily life. (p. 7)

The participatory world view outlined by Reason (1998) draws from Buddhist mindfulness practices, ceremony, phenomenology, co-operative inquiry and seems to echo Buber: "Experiential encounter with the presence of the world is the ground of all being and knowing. This encounter is prior to language and art. The I-Thou encounter with a living tree or person cannot be confused with our symbolic constructs" (p. 427).

Panpsychic philosopher Freya Mathews (2003) believes that the desire for meeting the interior or subjectivity of the world in an "intersubjective congress" (2003, p. 74) can be primarily characterized as erotic:

Where knowledge in the traditional sense seeks to explain, encounter seeks to engage. Knowledge seeks to break open the mystery of another's nature; encounter leaves that mystery intact. When I believe I have revealed the inner mysteries of another in the traditional way, my sense of its otherness in fact dissolves, and any possibility of true encounter evaporates. But where I respect its opaqueness, I retain my sense of its otherness, and hence the possibility of encounter remains. And while knowledge enables me to predict the behavior of the other, encounter does not: the mysterious other retains its capacity to surprise. Knowledge provides closure on the future, hence control and security. Encounter is open-ended, allowing for spontaneity and entailing vulnerability. That is why encounter is *erotic*. (p. 78, emphasis in original)

Mathews claims: "By focusing erotic intent upon the object or place in question, speaking to it, addressing it as though it were alive, we perhaps induce the larger psychic-physical field to manifest communicatively through it" (p. 82).

And she adds: "A person may deliberately seek encounter with a *wild bird*, by demonstrating a friendly receptiveness and interest through an attitude of attentiveness, without intentionally seeking information concerning the bird's behavioral repertoire at all" (p. 83, emphasis added). (I found this piece while the bird inquiry was happening.)

We launched the bird inquiry by first generating feedback criteria, developed around participatory knowing through bird contact, to see if our intention paid any dividends; these were ranked according to their level of astonishment and unusualness: 1. *A bird landing on one of us*; 2. *A bird in the house*; 3. *A bird in dreams*; 4. *Emotional states reflected by bird life*. The idea was to meet for two hours a week during our regular time, and for several weeks co-design rituals, share experiences of bird contact, and see if indeed the "universe" was able to respond as we participated with this intention. This was also depicted a non-verbal dialogue with the bird world. We would set aside a few minutes to check in on any bird-related phenomena, and some of us developed a co-created charismatic ritual where we identified with bird life and chimed in with small drums, rattles, bells, cymbals, and flutes. This for us seemed a ritual of propitiation, praise, and thanks to the bird world and issued into a spontaneous "bird-dance" with a group of us skipping in circles, arms out stretched as if flying. During the initial 4 or 5 weeks of the inquiry, the group was treated to a veritable avalanche of unusual and, at times miraculous, bird phenomena.

During the bird inquiry, I had a bird land on my shoulder (and I "died" of astonishment); one woman was struck by a flying parrot; another had a small finch flutter into her house and touch her head with its wings; my partner and I awoke to our puppy playing on the bed with a dead parrot; and others met with equally outrageous encounters and wondrous moments – all of which convinced us that this kind of magic has wings. After an impromptu bird dance, one woman went home to go through her deceased sister's things. Upon opening a letter she had written to her sister 15 years before, she was gob-smacked as it was a recording of a dream she had had of her sister turning into bird and then turning into light; this meant much to her.

We live by a beach, and I developed an idiosyncratic ritual where I would walk to the end of a promontory, imagining I was walking inside the body of an large, colorful, immortal bird body that extended out to the horizon (there has also been an existential "living into death," thread which appears to have intertwined with bird thread). I found this admittedly odd practice both centering and opening of my physical boundaries, as if some gentle communion were occurring with the "long-body." Abram (1997) states:

To the Western mind such views are likely to sound like reckless

“projections” of human consciousness. . . having nothing, in fact, to do with those actual birds or that forest, [yet] one makes contact with things and others only by actively participating in them, lending one’s sensory imagination to things in order to find how they alter and transform that imagination. . . . Perception is always participatory and hence. . . modern humanity’s denial of awareness in nonhuman nature is borne not by any conceptual or scientific rigor, but rather by an inability, or refusal, to fully perceive other organisms. (pp. 275-276)

It is hard to describe the communal enjoyment of such a participatory experiment: the bird criteria and the way they fulfilled themselves, or “talked to us” was rich, creative, humorous, subtle, and surprising. It is now no longer a figural thread, but every so often someone turns up with a story, and we decide whether it “counts” as part of the inquiry. One could probably argue that raising awareness about the bird encounters simply sharpens the figure, and that it is going on all the time in the background. But I would have to mention that, in my half century of living, I have had only one bird land on my shoulder; the timing must be taken into the account, which then renders the event far from mere coincidence.

The bird inquiry overlapped with Gestalt training. The bird inquiry overlapped with Gestalt training. One day while driving up a long country road, I saw a swamp hen (called a *pukeko* in Maori) standing next to its deceased partner on the road. I stopped and moved the poor thing off the road into the grass and drove away feeling sad about the loss of a feathered friend. I was heading to a Gestalt training with Crocker, who was visiting Australia, and I worked that day beginning with the sadness of birds. This turned into the death of a relationship with a person of Maori descent, whom I had loved when I was 18. She had been an important person to me at that time, and there was still some pain for me there. Somehow, the sight of the surviving bird staying near its departed partner, lost and confused, stirred some long-held and private pain for me. Had I not let her go in these 35 years, or was it existential grief, perhaps? Or symbolic of one’s losses over the passage of time? Perhaps all of these things? Crocker was the most elegant and understanding of therapists, and I cherish the encounter of understanding, empathy, and irony. An emotional process reflected in the bird world. My story is being privileged here but all of us, in some way or another, were deeply touched by the inquiry. We decided that there is in fact an extraordinary and participatory relationship to the world of nature if we choose to cultivate that awareness.

We then took our successful and self-transfiguring learning’s from the bird inquiry and turned it on our group in the “wellness thread.” The simple

logic was as follows: if our bodies extended enough and were open enough to dance with the subjectivity of the bird-world, if we could indeed change our relationship with bird-life, could we then harness that participatory and relational spirit in the service of health, wellness, and happiness? Our group became a ritual container for “co-creating wellness,” which included working at intrapsychic and interpersonal levels, collective and individual wellness and cohesion, and the simple practice of “wishing each other well” at the beginning and end of the group meetings.

### **Conclusion**

Jay Levin and Talia Bar-Yoseph Levine (2012) claim that Gestalt facilitators should move beyond the “authority” of the medical model’s “expert practitioner” and the psychotherapist as “change agent,” and instead encourage change with “participatory decision-making” (pp. 6-7). Spiritual narcissism (Ferrer, 2002), authoritarianism in religious traditions (Heron, 1998), spiritual imperialism and narcissism in new age thought (Lahood, 2010b) are hidden maladies in traditional and contemporary spirituality – including transpersonal psychology and the globalizing New Age movement (see Lahood, 2010a and 2010b) – and some of this off-centered spirituality (authoritarian-narcissistic pattern) may have been absorbed by some psychotherapists. A participatory-turn in transpersonal thought (e.g., Tarnas, 1991; Heron, 1998; Ferrer, 2002; Lahood, 2007b), similar to the relational-turn in Gestalt, has attempted to recognize and reduce these patterns; in a fundamental way co-inquiry, as I understand it, can function as an intervention with these distorted spiritual patterns. To address Gestalt therapy, spiritual-defenses, and relational-spirituality, however, requires a paper of its own.

Having argued here that Gestalt therapy and co-inquiry share some of the roots and fruits of the science of human encounter, I am reminded of Hycner’s (1989) statement that the client

will start realizing that though much of the therapy has been focusing on his individual “self,” that that is not the be-all and end-all of therapy. If it were, therapy would be an extremely narcissistic endeavor. An essential thrust of any good therapy is to help this person become more aware of other persons, and the need to be in service of other persons. The focus is not for the client to become perpetually preoccupied with his self. (p. 79)

My personal view is that Gestalt therapy, practiced with skill and embodying the best of its radical theoretical and relational stance, is on the verge of being

a *therapeutic collaborative inquiry* (with all the due caveats and considerations mentioned in this paper). And that collaborative inquiry, with its democratic rigor and cooperative verve, and practiced with the additional skills and sensitivity of Gestalt therapy, is on the threshold of being a system of healing; a sophisticated form of collaborative Gestalt therapy, or a *therapeia* (another word, like "democracy," derived from ancient Greece, from which we get the terms "therapy" and "therapist"), meaning a *place* (usually presided over by a spirit or deity) where a person could cultivate attention, receive care, get healed, and give service.

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### Appendix

The following list of co-inquiry skills is adapted from a personal communication from Heron in 2005. The same list appears in Reason (2003).

- **Being present and open.** This skill is about empathy, resonance, and attunement; participating in the way of being of other people and the more-than-human world. And being open to the meaning we give to, and find in, our world.
- **Bracketing and reframing.** The skill here is holding in abeyance the classifications and constructs we impose on our perceiving, so that we can be more open to its inherent primary, imaginal meaning. It is also about trying out alternative constructs to articulate an account of people and a world; we are open to reframing the defining assumptions of any context.
- **Radical practice and congruence.** This skill means being aware, during action, of its bodily form, its strategic form and guiding norms, its purpose or end and underlying values, its motives, its external context and defining beliefs, and its actual outcomes. It also means being aware of any lack of congruence between the different facets of the action, and adjusting them accordingly.
- **Non-attachment and meta-intentionality.** This is the knack of not investing one's identity and emotional security in an action, while remaining fully purposive and committed to it. At the same time, it involves having in mind one or more alternative behaviours, and considering their possible relevance and applicability to the total situation.
- **Emotional competence.** This is the ability to identify and manage emotional states. It includes keeping action free from distortion driven

by the unprocessed distress and conditioning of earlier years. The cooperative-inquiry group is itself a container and a discipline within which these skills can be developed. The skills can be honed and refined if the inquiry group adopts a range of validity procedures, intended to free the various forms of knowing involved in the inquiry process from the distortion of uncritical subjectivity.

- **Research cycling**, a valid cooperative-inquiry, involves going through the phases of inquiry several times, cycling between action and reflection, looking at experience and practice from different angles, developing different ideas, trying different ways of behaving.
- **Divergence and convergence**. Research cycling can be convergent, in which case the co-researchers look several times at the same issue, maybe looking each time in more detail; or it can be divergent, as co-researchers decide to look at different issues on successive cycles. Many variations of convergence and divergence are possible in the course of an inquiry. It is up to each group to determine the appropriate balance for their work.
- *Authentic collaboration*. Since intersubjective dialogue is a key component in refining the forms of knowing, it is important for the inquiry group to develop an authentic form of collaboration. The inquiry will not be truly co-operative if one or two people dominate the group, or if some voices are left out.
- **Challenging consensus collusion**. This involves a simple procedure which authorizes any inquirer at any time to adopt formally the role of devil's advocate, in order to question the group as to whether one of several forms of collusion is afoot.
- **Managing distress**. The group adopts some regular method for surfacing and processing repressed distress, which may get projected out unawares, thus distorting thought, perception, and action within the inquiry.
- **Reflection and action**. Since inquiry process depends on alternating phases of action and reflection, it is important to find an appropriate balance so that there is neither too much reflection on too little experience (armchair theorizing), nor too little reflection on too much experience (mere activism). Each inquiry group needs to find its own balance between action and reflection.
- **Chaos and order**. If a group is open, adventurous, and innovative, putting all at risk to reach out for the truth beyond fear and collusion, then once the inquiry is well under way divergence of thought and expression may descend into confusion, uncertainty, ambiguity, disorder, and tension. But the group can be prepared for it, tolerate it, and wait until there is a real sense of creative resolution.

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