

Interview by
Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb

Therapeutic challenges in the contemporary world. Gestalt Therapy out of its bubble.

an interview with
Malcolm Parlett

Margherita (M.S.L.): Hello Malcolm!

Malcolm Parlett (M.P.): *Hi*

M.S.L.: Nice to have this talk with you, I am pleased to interview you for the Italian journal “Quaderni di Gestalt”. I take the chance of this conference in the UK where you are one of the fathers of Gestalt therapy. So it’s my pleasure to ask you a few questions that are important to me in these years, at a time when we see that society is developing in, as I said, desensitised ways, and the question is how can psychotherapy, and in particular Gestalt therapy, adjust itself to apply its principles to these new clinical evidences? So my first question is how do you see the influence of society in terms of developing capacity for contact of people, or anything that you’d like to say about this.

M.P.: *Well, it’s a great honour and privilege to be interviewed for your wonderful journal. This is a huge question you’re asking, and you know that I have long been considering it. Paul Goodman’s role in the Gestalt world has been of great interest to me, and it’s a valid question to consider -- as he did -- how to bridge between what therapists do and what the world requires of us as Gestalt therapists and coaches. You are quite right, there is desensitisation on a massive scale, and it has a massive effect on the quality of contact. Relations between people are changing -- in part as a result of the social media revolution. In one sense, people are hungry for meaning and connection. They have an appetite to join others, to be met, to be part of something, to be part of a community, yet it’s like they live on the equivalent of a McDonald’s diet, because the structures of society, which for centuries provided a stable familiarity, and provided basic support, have often been eroded, and the substitutes that have emerged have not been sufficient. The effects of neo-liberal economics, much greater mobility, break-ups of long-established communities, technological changes, and the increased individualisation of society have all led to a general “Americanisation of society”. The result is that there is a huge shortfall in people’s achievement of satisfaction, their needs are changing... well, many needs are staying the same but they try to meet them in new ways and they become addicted to this “McDonaldisation” of contact and experience.*

M.S.L.: Also I think that the experiences that children have since their birth are different...

M.P.: *Absolutely, the parents are pivotal....*

M.S.L.: For instance, the parents are more anxious and the quality of contact is maybe confusing or less supporting, so that young children have to grow up without the hugs of their parents, without the containment of the parents, and so they are more anxious because they cannot exhale, they cannot release their attention, and so then they go to social media that can give a partial answer to their questions but these don’t support the physical need, the bodily need.

M.P.: *Well, my grandson is a P. E. teacher -- physical education teacher -- in California, working with children of five or six years old and evidently the things that young children used to be able to do physically at that age, really simple things, they can't do now...*

M.S.L.: So even the physical capacity is less...

M.P.: *Yes, evidently there has been a marked change, just recently... less than three years. From my point of view, this is another reminder that we are in the midst of very rapid global change, with humanity encountering a global crisis of huge proportions: environmentally, ecologically, climatically, technologically, we're in such a critical place.*

M.S.L.: And there's the terrorism...

M.P.: *And also terrorism, and it underlines the existential questions we are facing. What, as Gestalt therapists, is our response-ability? Can we make any difference to our clients' lives in terms of responding to the global crisis? My own belief, which is implied in my book, *Future Sense: Five Explorations of Whole Intelligence for a World That's Waking Up*, is that Gestalt has to develop different ways of communicating its visionary outlook. Gestalt therapy has a fantastic amount to offer compared to other kinds of therapy, because it can accommodate the actual social and other conditions in which people live. To go back to the original language of "organism" and "environment", we can embrace them both together (as the "organism/environment field") in our core theory: we engage directly with people's actual fields of experience. We are not locating our work in terms of internal intra-psychic processing problems, we are also engaged with how clients shape their reality in the context of our society. Society is changing massively and so therefore human experiences change drastically too, and Gestalt is uniquely, of all the therapies theoretically and practically, capable of addressing these new shifts that are recurring. Given our orientation, we have to ask why Gestalt therapy isn't more widely known? Why are the concepts not central in the general understanding of society - when they should be and when they could be revolutionary? My answer, in part, to this big puzzle is to question our language and jargon - the usual conceptualisations of Gestalt. Even the term itself -- "gestalt" - can take a long time to communicate what it means. We get off on the wrong foot. What I have suggested is a different starting word or phrase. I suggest, as Gestalt therapists and coaches, that what we are engaged in is the development of "whole intelligence". In using this term, I am deliberately expanding the usual notion of intelligence beyond its usual cognitive, conceptual, intellectual associations to include the totality of a person's or a group's overall competence, their understanding of their situation -- which is as much a felt embodied reaction as it is something intellectual.*

I want to include – as part of developing whole intelligence -- the ability to function effectively in this complex world, to demonstrate good judgement, and to gain a holistic view of the world and of one's own place within it. I'm thinking that developing human qualities like "common sense", like "maintaining resilience", like "freedom to act", like "ability to focus" -- are all aspects of what Gestalt therapists have been promoting for years -- for instance, free-functioning, increased awareness, developing greater response-ability, questioning societal and family introjects.

They all form part of the developmental pathway that I refer to as the growth of whole intelligence. I differentiate five dimensions of this development, all of which are critical areas of endeavour for Gestalt therapists.

M.S.L.: Yes, what you maintain in your writings, in your books, is that Gestalt therapists or practitioners have to support certain abilities -- which I could also call domains -- to make contact. You focus on the capacity for contact, it's something that relates to the contact making. I also think that it's important for our time, that we focus on the relationship within the organism and environment field, instead of on the capacities of single individuals.

M.P.: Yes, We cannot slip back into an individualistic model. There's been a huge environmental shift and environment-wide changes that affect whole groups of people. Thus, for instance in how people communicate with one another can be profoundly affected by changes in the society, or by what is modelled on television, or in commercial settings by how sales staff are taught how to manipulate customers. So it's a multileveled complexity here; we are talking about what makes for high-functioning organisations, vibrant communities, solid families. Ideally, growing children need conditions in which all the dimensions of whole intelligence are in place, or are operational in their surroundings. Each dimension depends on the others also being present -- they are interdependent and all necessary. Thus we cannot consider the contacting process between people without also looking at how the parties are embodied.

We have to be in touch with our sense of solidity through having our feet on the ground; we need our capacity to breathe, feel, and sense, in order to relate significantly with another individual. Yet staying embodied in many urban settings is harder, because of noise, pollution, crowds, and the permanent distraction of phones. Likewise, we need the dimension of experimenting, to be inventive, and able to break out of the automatic patterns in general use in society. Individually, and in organisations, we need a situational perspective, to be able to see the societal pressures and to remain resilient and purposeful. Self-recognising is another area, as you cannot relate to situations and to other people if you don't connect to yourself, if you are not in touch with your own process.

M.S.L.: This focus on society underlines a very important aspect of psychotherapy today, an ethical aspect, not to consider oneself simply as a good psychotherapist who does the right move, and has the right techniques, but as a human being that also needs to take care of himself or herself in order to continue to practise in today's conditions.

M.P.: *Absolutely, because as practitioners we exist in this complex society, and crazy world ourselves. We can't stand apart and stay altogether detached, we need to understand it. In this respect, we stand on the same ground as our clients or patients and this presents whole new challenges for our practice: like how much do we share, how much do we withhold about our own fears, how much do we challenge them to become more conscious of what is happening to them as a result of changes in the world they are living within...*

M.S.L.: And also how much to trust our uncertainty...

M.P.: *Acknowledge with humility that we are...*

M.S.L.: ... uncertain, and nevertheless are still be able to help somehow. So the ethical stance in psychotherapy today can be to trust one's own uncertainty and hold on to the possibility of co-creating something with the other, instead of appearing to own the answers about everything...

M.P.: *Yes, each person has uncertainties.... We're living in an era where difficult existential decisions are necessary for everybody, because how do we live in a world where we carry on living a healthy, creative, and stable enough life style when the evidence is that within a few years, further vast changes are likely to happen: for instance, the advance of robots will be fundamentally changing our patterns of living and employment, there will be continued political unrest, and within a few years we are going to have temperature rises of the Earth's atmosphere reaching into the really dangerous category where they could go exponential. I mean, the future changes are so big and so influential. How do individual people, families, communities, whatever, face the immensity of this? Hardly anybody talks about huge a change it will be, but that does not mean that the coming crisis is not registered or has no impact on the present field.*

M.S.L.: In a word, psychotherapy cannot be isolated from what is happening in society. We are whole beings and whatever we do and how we act is also part of the society, contributing to the changes of the society, even if we are in the role of psychotherapists. How do you think we can change or adjust our training programs in order to recognise this new context in which Gestalt psychotherapists work?

M.P.: *Well, it's an enormous challenge, because the practices and training assumptions and so on, are all to some extent still predicated on a set of professional assumptions that belong to the past.*

My own feeling is that separating therapy from organisation development, and organisation development from coaching -- making all of these into separate professional activities, and demarcating them clearly from one another, is not the right way to go. After all, in the beginning Gestalt was seen much more in both therapy and political terms. It was part of the founding groups' vision. Paul Goodman was a political activist and an anarchist, and a questioner, and a confronter of different ways of thinking existing in society. He was reaching out much further than just operating within a narrow therapeutic field. So my own vision would be of the whole Gestalt community becoming much more like Goodman, critical realists of our societal contexts, the conditions that actually help shape people's lives, and for us to support our clients' learning, resilience, and creativity in whatever ways we can, increasing the possibility of their supporting themselves to make sense of their reality and their choices, and for them to find the particular contribution they can make, which emerges from their political commitment, social opportunity, or their awakened personal interest.

The big theme of my book is that everyone -- each one of us -- has a unique relationship to society, and to the range of possibilities, because we are totally individual in our history, through our trainings, family backgrounds, societal customs, and life experiences. So each of us has a unique perspective. Humanity needs this diversity, from an evolutionary point of view; diversity increases our chances of developing the best ideas, so we need to be able to manage all the many different perspectives and draw on them to gain a much more rapid form of societal learning, because that's the only way that our species is going to survive.

M.S.L.: I agree and also I think that opens us to holding a positive attitude, a hoping attitude, in which society as a whole, and professional groups -- all wanting to do their best -- can work together in their diverse ways to create a Gestalt of all our efforts.

M.P.: Yes, and I do think that there are many fantastic developments happening. At the same time as verging on a crisis with terrible happenings in the world there is also existing a mass of people who are inventing things and innovating and setting up new programs, new enquiries, new frontiers, all over the place, environmentally, socially, communally, economically... all sorts of experiments are happening, and I would like to see Gestalt therapists being much more open to the extent of all this change and more in touch with it and building connections with Gestalt ideas and practices. Yes, "the world is waking up", which is part of the subtitle of my book, and awareness of this offers help to sustaining the world's general psychological health. Our excitement rises if we hear of, say, some program that is dealing with harnessing water in dry parts of the world, or of some new medical breakthrough, or the emergence of some new bright creative musical talent. If we're reading about this, or are witnesses to the inventiveness, or are involved -- even at a distance -- with the social structures that are built around these developments, people feel excited and no longer altogether powerless. People want good news, and to become part of it!

Otherwise they can sink into a pervasive despair about the future, and they add to others' feeling hopeless.

M.S.L.: Ok, so with these hopeful perspectives, thank you for this interview... unless you want to say something else.

M.P.: *Yes, one thing: I think that one of the strengths that Gestalt offers is potentially to bring together areas of thought and experience that often get separated, including the societal, the spiritual and the political and the quest for personal growth, all the dimensions of human development. Actually all of them can come together under the umbrella of Gestalt and we need to be able to move freely and boldly between these domains that have so often been kept apart, a compartmentalisation of human wisdom.*

M.S.L.: Yes, we have a huge task but also a very interesting one.

M.P.: *We're right at the frontier. We have, I think, an incredibly exciting discipline and we need to influence our neighbours.*

M.S.L.: Thank you Malcolm, thank you very much.

M.P.: *Thank you.*