

By Lee Zevy

# **RADICAL RESPECT: GESTALT THERAPY IN TROUBLED TIMES**

**Review of AAGT Conference  
in Toronto Aug 14th-19th 2018**

This biennial conference for the Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy proved to be emblematic of its title throughout the six days it was held at the Chelsea Hotel in downtown Toronto. The title was chosen to reflect conflicts that had arisen and were processed during the planning of the venue and conference as well as the need to find the means of respecting differences reflective of the wider field of troubling times.

The conference brought together 330 participants from 27 countries and from the beginning due to multiple weather cancellations and other exigencies required patience and adjustments in the preconference half day and whole day schedule as certain leaders could not get to the conference in time. It was clear from the start that good humor, patience and consideration would be a hallmark of the relational aspect of the conference. In spite of the fact that participants had to choose other workshop possibilities there was a feeling of interest and connection.

The hosts Jay Tropianskaia, Carolina Edwards and Heather Keys and the staff and volunteers of the Gestalt Center of Toronto in addition to the members of the Central Planning Committee who had worked on the conference the past year were hard pressed to continuously make adjustments as needed and were the backbone of the civility, concern and efficiency. Their organization was remarkable as a Newcomers Meeting, Process Groups, Special Interest Groups (Gender and Sexual Diversity, Working with Children and Adolescents, Research, Buddhist Psychology and Gestalt Therapy and People of Color) Poster sessions, Community Meetings, AGM meetings, Lunches, Dinners, Entertainment, Auction and various impromptu meetings occurred throughout the 6 days.

When two participants became ill and had to be taken to the hospital at different times they were accompanied by friends from the conference and then in a loving show of solidarity showered with love, support, food and care the rest of the time.

The 3 Keynote and Plenary speakers Deborah Plummer, Margherita Spagnuolo-Lobb and Miriam Taylor, in addition to a Blessing by an Elder Shirley Gillis-Kendall of Turtle Clan and a member of Alderville First Nation, kept the conference theme grounded on different days and left participants thoughtful and excited each time. Jim Battaglia, the technology wizard, organized multiple videos of different aspects of the conference during the opening and closing in addition to a deeply meaningful video memorializing members who had passed away.

The facilitated process groups, an integrated part of all AAGT conferences, met at various times throughout the conference and provided a haven where participants brought their experiences, emotional exchanges, conflicts and other important material to gain support and help.

This was extremely important as strong feelings and experiences emerged during one Community meeting of difficulties that had occurred during workshops and between participants involving racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, gender and privilege occurrences.

Although emotional intensity was manifest everyone maintained a balanced respectful listening and responsive attitude. One positive outcome of these exchanges is that some participants who had been hiding parts of themselves became more open to others as they realized the supportive ground that existed.

In an unprecedented move all the proposals that had been submitted for workshops were accepted and there was a plethora of exciting and informative choices that balanced the theory/practice paradigm of Gestalt Therapy. Not all the participants were Gestalt Therapists.

Some came from Coaching and Organizational Development and some came for the love of the modality. In one workshop where a participant did not speak English a unique solution was found to use cell phone English to Spanish translation to keep her included. The unexpected benefit was that group members had to “get to the point” more quickly and with greater facility.

In terms of Entertainment the Ceilidh was extraordinary as participants graciously offered their music, dance, comedic and performance expertise to a rousing grateful audience. When the Auction run by the Inimitable Charlie Bowman for the scholarship fund was not sufficiently productive he brilliantly started a steam rolling process of asking for donations of the fee of one session. In a mounting fever of participation along with the regular auction this ended up raising \$10,000.

One of the most meaningful parts of the conference was the presentation of the Lifetime Achievement Award to Margherita Spagnuolo-Lobb by Dan Bloom. Margherita has given so much to Gestalt Therapy over the years that it was a wonderful recognition by the LAA committee (Bud Feder and Lee Zevy) and the Central Planning Committee of her years of contribution.

On the last day the important transition from the exiting President, Toni Gilligan to the incoming President, Talia bar-Yoseph Levine was remarkably successful via Video as Talia could not be present in person. Prior to that the participants of the final Community Meeting gave valuable suggestions and points of view for the AAGT Board to consider. A new committee on Social Responsibility and Human Rights is in the process of being formed and an important discussion is taking place regarding the addition of International to our name to be more inclusive of who we are today.

From beginning to end this conference was an example of a continuously unfolding creative and adaptive process a grounding principal of Gestalt Therapy. The phenomenal field was ever present as conference participants grappled with the ways in which difference and how we relate to it is affecting all of us worldwide. In the instance of the conference for the most part difference was met with graciousness, support, respect and interest living up to the wish embedded in the conference title. Perhaps because we are a microcosm of the world at large believing in a relational imperative we were able to honor our historical roots and listen attentively and less judgmentally to each other. The Board of AAGT has given money to Gestalt Therapists in Nepal to help start an institute. That Gestalt Therapy has spread so far was beyond the realm of possibility of the founders who believed that their approach could heal in a new way. In the final analysis the conference was an excellent example how the powerful healing possibilities inherent in our work can spread as so many came together with respect.

Lee Zevy, is a Fellow and past President of the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy. She has taught, published and presented on Gestalt Therapy for many years.