

UKAGP

The UK Association for Gestalt Practitioners

Living in a 50 Degrees Environment

By Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb



I was invited by Piotr to tell my experience of living in 50 degrees, for a couple of days this summer, in Syracuse (Italy). I gladly accepted, as I wanted to reflect on my experience and share it with you, dear British colleagues, keeping you in the ground of my story, with your capacity for compassion, open-mindedness to what is outside of your country, and the practical generosity with which you are ready to move.

As usual the early August 2021 was very hot; we were living in temperatures well above 30 degrees during the day. I was busy with the final details of the new book, 'Psychopathology of the Situation,' which I was due to deliver to the publisher on those very days. The media had predicted exceptionally hot weather, over 40.

We all wondered: How do you stand up to such high temperatures? No one had the answer. Only the advice to drink a lot.

Then came that dreaded heat, for two days our bodies were immersed in a temperature of 45- 48 degrees. During the hottest hours the air coming in through the windows was fire, and we had to close all the openings in the houses, to protect ourselves. Paradoxically, we had to protect ourselves from the heat as we do from the cold, by isolating ourselves from the environment.

Two terrible days, not only for the discomfort caused by the high temperatures, but also for the awareness, confirmed by all the media, that in the years to come we will have more and more of these days. How will our bodies be able to resist this rise in temperatures? The idea of blood coming to boil in the veins is terrible. How many would die and who would be able to save themselves? And how does one die from the heat? What happens, what does it feel like?

As a phenomenologist, I have been in the experience of that heat; I have 'savoured' it without fighting it. I thought of Goodman's poem that the Polsters placed as the opening of their book 'Gestalt Therapy Integrated': 'He tasted the elixir of being at a loss, when anything that occurs must necessarily be a surprise (...) he touched his body and looked around and felt, 'Here I am and now,' and did not become panicky.' (Paul Goodman, 'The Empire City')

I didn't feel pain to fight against, no traumatic sensations, but rather I felt sleepy, and the urge to fall asleep. Is this how it works then when the heat kills us? Is this how a large part of humanity will die in a few years if we fail to save the planet? We fall asleep without knowing we're dying. Heat causes everything, including the brain, to function at a minimum. Death by cold must be something similar.

My mind was creating apocalyptic scenarios in which, in a few decades or less, a third of the world's population will die from extreme heat, a third from floods and natural disasters, and a third from pandemics. At the same time, the sea was beautiful, clean, calm, letting fish and marine flora be clearly seen with its transparency. Swimming in that sea, being in the beauty of those waters at sunset with spectacular colors both in the sky and in the water, seemed to be a gift that this mistreated land gave us in its great generosity, showing us that pain can also generate beauty if recognised in its vitality.

If this year we have had two days with 50 degrees, next year we will have maybe 5, in two years 10. Someone will fall asleep and leave without suffering, simply losing consciousness and abandoning himself to death. A kind of mortal physiological depression, a deprivation of the capacity to 'ad-gredere,' of the vitality that allows us to be curious, to advance in the world, to acquire novelty and grow. Will this be how we die, when the temperature on the planet continues to rise?

We are stunned by environmental catastrophes. In Germany, in the United States, and in many other parts of the world, hurricanes sweep away houses, entire towns. People lose everything, the dreams of a lifetime, the sense of security that comes from being productive individuals in a social community. What can we do in the face of the force of nature turning against us? It seems to us that, at least in the moment, we cannot fight back, there is no bear or tiger to kill to save our lives. But, projecting into a larger time/space, we know what we can do, we must respect nature. Such a simple thing requires a synergy between populations and governments that has not been possible so far, and may not be possible in the future. The selfish interests of those who should give up exploiting and poisoning the earth have been stronger than the intelligent look at the changes needed to save humanity.

So today, more than ever, each of us will have to take on the responsibility of being part of a planet that needs help. Each one of us will have to become a bit like Greta Thunberg, raising our voice, saying what is happening, being an example of existence-in-contact with the reality of the earth in which we live.

Will we have the strength to face the problem, without denying it or fleeing to other planets, and believe that we can do it? Will we have the faith that will make us plant a million trees a day, the civic sense that will make us clean up a beach that we did not dirty?

In the language of Gestalt therapy, we can say that it is a matter of identifying with the vital energy of contact and the fullness of our presence in the here and now, on this planet. It is easier to deny the seriousness of the problem and continue doing what we were doing before. What can we do in the face of such a great threat where governments have to move? It is easy to become desensitised, to lose the responsibility that we always have, as human beings, since we share existence on this earth.

We all know that the worst evil, the psychopathology of this situation, is to think that you cannot do anything. I must say that you, dear British colleagues, have always been a model of taking responsibility. I remember how some of you have for years avoided taking the plane and made long train journeys to donate your individual contribution.

As gestaltists, we turn to a theory that highlights what happens between organism and environment and the newness that emerges from their contact. It is important that neither side anaesthetise itself in the conflict, in the encounter between two diversities from which all growth originates (as Heraclitus said, and as Perls and Goodman reiterate). Every growth implies a newness to be deconstructed and assimilated, a co-created process that requires input from both sides.

But perhaps the novelty of climate change is too great to deconstruct and address. Yet it is crucial that we are aware of what is happening in the here and now, as an effect of global changes, when it is 50 degrees hot, or when St. Petersburg, not far from the North Pole, has recorded 30 degrees for as many as two weeks this year, or when rains are increasingly turning into hurricanes.

Where is our self in that moment? What kind of presence can we maintain in these events, so that we are fully there and oriented toward protective action that takes into account the environment? How can we keep ourselves active, awake, not only in the emergency of an environmental catastrophe, but especially when it feels like we are returning to normal?

Compared to the man who fought a visible threat, we are in a more sophisticated situation, because we can comprehend at broad range seemingly distant phenomena that are actually interconnected. We can therefore prevent, and use the integrative capacities of our self, by understanding the line of continuity that exists between various events that do not respect nature. It is there, in the piece of plastic that we have to throw away somewhere that our self is activated, not only because we obey the rules of waste recycling, but because we are aware of what would happen to that piece of plastic if we abandoned it on the beach or in the sea. We should have no peace when we see bags of trash abandoned in the countryside or on the ground. And if we understand this, it will be obvious to train our children in the value of cleaning the environment, not just the home. The planet is our home. Now, dear British colleagues, I say these things well aware that you are far ahead of us, in Italy, with respect to the issue of education to this environmental sensitivity.

We could rewrite our founding text, the PHG, in light of the organism/environment field today. We are no longer in a time when it is the organism that must be protected from introjecting social rules that prevent it from expressing its creativity and dissent. We are in a time in which it is being desensitised to the complexity of the relationship between organism and nature that leads us to destruction. We need to recognise first of all the fragilities that underlie this relationship, a new awareness compared to the idea of man's strength over nature, or even to the integration of human impulses into society.

There are no bears or tigers to annihilate in order to save the human race, nor sexual or aggressive impulses to integrate, but fragility to respect in order to preserve the possibility of co-existing. There are no infinite seas in which to throw everything, or ethereal atmospheres in which to disperse poisons. The sea, the earth,

the sky are elements in a wonderful delicate balance. The earth is not the “great mother” that receives all our waste, nor a threatening animal to be tamed. The earth is a marvelously complex system, of which we humans are inextricably a part, whose strength comes from respecting the fragility of its integrative processes. We can no longer deny the long-term consequences of actions that ignore this fragility.

Perhaps that relationality of the organism/environment field that we felt was basic and underdeveloped in the PHG, a work too centered on the individual in interaction with the world and little on environmental response, can definitely be developed today in our minds as gestaltists.

We can no longer observe only the individual, but we must consider the synchrony, the reciprocity that exists in the absolutely biunivocal relationship between environment and organism.

I am sure that children would understand this concept better than we do, and if they saw someone throwing a paper on the ground they would know that the earth has to accommodate that paper somehow, has to process it. That paper should never again disappear from our imaginations. It is up to us adults to educate children all over the world to consider the earth as an otherness to be taken care of, rather than as a ‘great mother’ capable of receiving everything and to be exploited without question.

What we can do personally then is as valuable as a governor of a nation deciding on poisonous emissions into the atmosphere. We can change the way we look at things, enter the paradigm of reciprocity (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2020), and help the people we care for to do the same. For example, in our therapeutic encounters or work with organisations do we keep the person/nature relationship in mind? Or are we still centred on the individual who must find his or her autonomy and well-being? How does our clinical mind move when faced with a patient with frequent anxiety attacks, or who cannot process the loss of a loved one who died during Covid, or when faced with a corporate group? Do we think about empowering individuals to overcome trauma, and to feel strong in the face of anxiety? Or do we open a window into how they perceive themselves in relation to nature, and work on the balance possible between their organism and the environment? The relationship with nature has become a part of people’s background that we cannot overlook. Our clinical curiosity should include questions such as, ‘How do you feel here and now in relation to the nature around you?’ ‘How do you feel the earth you walk on?’ ‘Do you feel supported?’ and ‘Is your step sensitive to the needs of the earth?’

I am certain that this concrete attention to both sides of the organism/environment field would allow us to explore a particular suffering from which people today become desensitised (the trauma of a planet that is hurting) and would make people aware of the suffering of the earth and responsible for their actions.

When we speak of Gestalt therapy as therapy of the situation (as Wollants taught us, 2012), it is this situation that is most important for us to attend to in therapy, to create grounds of safety that will allow people to be present (not desensitised in the face of environmental trauma) and consequently develop creative solutions to the environmental crisis.

Thank you for your attention.

Writing this piece for you and the UKAGP Newsletter has been a way to stay in touch with nature, with organism/environment field and with who we are.

Margherita

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As an author and editor of many books, articles and chapters, Margherita has developed a relational Gestalt therapy approach, applied to clinical and psychiatric settings, to working with children, groups and organisational development. Her 2013 book 'The Now-for-Next in Psychotherapy. Gestalt Therapy Recounted in Post-Modern Society' is available in 8 languages. She is an editor of the upcoming book 'Psychopathology of the Situation' that will be published by Routledge in the next few months in their Gestalt Therapy Book Series. She is a main editor of the scientific 'Journal Quaderni di Gestalt' (since 1985). She has received the Lifelong Achievement Award from the Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy (AAGT) (Toronto, Canada, August 2018).

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