

How wide is the field? Gestalt therapy, capitalism and the natural world

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Abstract: A recent UN report has warned that we are heading for an unprecedented global crisis if we do not radically change our ways. Climate change is no longer a hypothetical argument but a reality that threatens the existence of human and other-than-human life on the planet. With that information in mind, can we afford to keep practising psychotherapy with a focus on the individual and their personal needs, or do we need to radically question the role of psychotherapy in its lack of relationship to the more-than-human world? This article investigates where aspects of Gestalt psychotherapy may be too closely aligned with the capitalist paradigm, that risks costing us the Earth. I argue that we need to widen our notion of what is part of the field. I reflect on our theory in relation to anthropocentrism, individuality, materiality, privatisation, growth, progress and the lack of a cosmological perspective. This is by no means an exhaustive overview but an attempt to open the conversation.

Keywords: capitalism, complex systems, 'more-than-human world', anthropocentrism, individuality, materialism, systemic change, mythology, cosmology.

Preface

I am a white European woman. I carry the horrors of Auschwitz, industrialisation and the Empire in my bones. The traces of the Berlin Wall run through my body like an invisible chain. The raping of women and the raping of the Earth has scarred the texture of my femininity. My voice is silenced by patriarchy. Plastic in the oceans clogs my veins. Refugees washed up on the shores of our rich countries make me blind and numb. My body retches in an attempt to rid itself of my bingeing on accumulated privilege.

In order to survive, I anaesthetise my human experience. I have forgotten how to connect with the land underneath my feet. I have killed off any notion that the Earth may be alive. I have banished God and the idea of the sacred. What I believe in is my individuality and the value of owning things. Matter is dead. I feel lost and empty. I live in a world and in a body that I no longer know how to inhabit. I have settled in this no-man's-land, but I am not alone. It is densely populated here.

Sometimes in certain precious moments, my body remembers that I am made of the Earth. What I call 'I' is made up of more micro-organisms

than human cells (Clark, 2012). 'I' is not an entity but a multiplicity, a reciprocal relationship between the human and the more-than-human world. I am made up of stardust, oxygen, carbon dioxide, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium and phosphorus, just like the world around me. I am not separate from it, I am made of it. In those moments I feel a sense of wonder.

Introduction

In October this year, the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change published a report calling for urgent and unprecedented changes over the next twelve years in order to limit the catastrophic effects climate change will have on life as we know it (Watts, 2018). Previously, the Capital Institute itself made a direct link between the capitalist worldview and climate change and called for broader, more holistically oriented approaches to global problems (Confino, 2015).

We may ask what this has got to do with psychotherapy and how we can, as a discipline, begin to determine our role in wider world issues.

The systems theorist Fritjof Capra (1982) points out that the dysfunction of complex systems on the world stage is primarily a crisis of perception. He believes

that our seemingly innocent collective everyday beliefs contribute to the stuckness of much larger, complex systems. Our assumptions often serve as the connective tissue that holds things in their rigid place.

Our Western culture seems to destroy with a sense of superiority the very basis on which our existence rests, whilst psychotherapy continues to focus on our individual and inner worlds. In line with Capra's argument, I believe that it is time for us to ask if there are areas in which our profession may reinforce unconscious biases that risk costing us the Earth. Are there aspects of our theories that inadvertently contribute to the larger problem?

It is the business of Gestalt psychotherapists to bring awareness to fixed, dysfunctional and repetitive patterns. Our theoretical view is holistic and encompasses all that is part of the field. Field theory and our notion of self as being formed at the contact boundary emphasises our embeddedness in the world and our reciprocal interdependence with this world. So how come that we are still relatively ill prepared to include the state of the world and our relationship with it in what we do in our consulting rooms? I argue here, that despite our wide-ranging theory, figure formation often operates within an invisible confine of an individualised and privatised psychology.

In this article, I investigate aspects of Gestalt therapy in terms of their alignment with the dominant capitalist paradigm in its emphasis on anthropocentrism, progress, privatisation, domestication and materialism. I suggest that this lens has become so familiar that we can hardly see outside of it. My main focus is on the relationship our discipline has with what cultural ecologist David Abram (1997) calls the 'more-than-human world', meaning the natural, living world that humans participate in. I also reflect on existing aspects of Gestalt theory that already offer the possibility of a wider notion of the field and allow for something new to emerge on the fringe.

My intention is not to deliver a definitive statement, but to widen the conversation. I believe that Gestalt therapy has got something to contribute to the bigger picture but will not deliver 'the' answer and neither will psychotherapy as a whole. No single discipline can do this.

The philosopher Zygmunt Bauman (2000) writes about our Western culture as being in a state of 'liquid modernity' – a state that is characterised by chaotic, ungovernable situations, where change in one area of the system has ramifications throughout in unpredictable ways (Bednarek, 2017). Complex problems cannot be solved in old, familiar ways anymore; they require transdisciplinarity. We have to think outside of the confines of the known, look beyond the boundaries of our defined schools of thought and widen the

perspective, just as Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (1951/1994) once did.

Fritjof Capra (Capra and Luisi, 2014) tells us that in order to encourage change within a system, we do not have to throw out all that we know. He suggests that change emerges from something dynamic within the old system. He advises us to pay close attention to emergence on the fringes. We can do this with our attention on large or small complex systems.

I suggest that we urgently need to widen our theories, open up dialogue and create new visions for where we are heading – but we need to stay clear of the old patriarchal ways of generating these visions, i.e where a few powerful, often white, often Western, often upper- or middle-class, often male individuals are in charge of the narrative. The celebration of the lone heroic thinker who presents 'the' answer denies co-created wisdom and is in itself a symptom of a patriarchal worldview that seems to be letting us down.

Response-ability in the therapy room

I started my study of Psychology and Social Policy in Germany in the 1990s. At the time I was a research assistant for a community psychology project in a deprived area of a German University town. The project was based on Gestalt principles and the thinking of Paul Goodman. Psychotherapists worked with individual clients but took systemic issues that arose in therapy out into the world. Therapists convened large community meetings, and educated and empowered the neighbourhood to tackle matters regarding housing, infrastructure, education, employment and mental health with the local Government. Working with the whole was considered more empowering than a focus on the sum of the parts. This project fundamentally changed the structure and landscape of the community through its systemic, ecological approach. It was my first encounter with Gestalt therapy and it deeply moved and inspired me.

When I finally studied Gestalt psychotherapy, my four-year training focused entirely on the dyadic relationship. Sociopolitical issues were not part of what was deemed to be a relevant focus for the aspiring psychotherapist. They were understood to be part of the field but this part was hardly ever made figural. Whilst I became more and more focused on understanding inner processes, attachment patterns and the private needs of my clients, the state of the Earth deteriorated.

At the UKAGP/BGJ joint conference in 2017, one of the main focal points was the question: 'How does our political field influence our response-ability in the therapy room and beyond?' I hope it is fair to summarise that there was overall agreement that we

face a global ecological crisis. Delegates expressed strong desires to impact positively on the wider society through their work. When it came to how we do this, we found that some of us have started to leave the therapy room. We work in the natural environment, with communities, corporations and larger systems. Some delegates had published contributions to larger world issues (Melnick, in Melnick and Nevis, 2013; Parlett, 2015). But on the whole there seemed to be a pervasive sense of insecurity in knowing how best to respond to global challenges.

There is a widely held belief in our profession that all psychotherapy is a political act (Melnick, 2017). This opinion was voiced by many delegates at the conference named above. The hope was that a person who is aware of themselves and the choices they make will contribute positively to a healthier society (ibid.). Personally, I believe this to be too optimistic. We are all steeped in the same culture, which risks making us blind to that which we take for granted. Therapists are subject to unconscious bias as much as clients (Fishbane, 2016).

The title of Hillman and Ventura's (1992) well-known book *We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy and the World's Getting Worse*, highlights the problem with the assumption that more psychotherapy will automatically lead to a better world. Hillman criticises our profession for its focus on the individual at the expense of the wider world. And indeed, in comparison to other subjects, there seems to be little focus on the political and ecological field in our training institutes, our journals and our conferences.

I would argue that before we can even begin to explore where our response-ability in the therapy room and beyond could lie, we need to understand where we may be aligned with the cultural values of the patriarchal and capitalist paradigm that is said to be at the heart of causing major problems (Confino, 2015).

Mental health – a cultural construct

In a report titled *Regenerative Capitalism*, the Capital Institute stresses a link between the capitalist worldview and global challenges such as climate change and political instability (Confino, 2015). According to this report, we need a move away from capitalist values towards a new systems-based mindset, which recognises that the functioning of complex wholes cannot be understood without paying attention to the dynamic relationships that give rise to greater wholes. This recommendation comes from a conservative institution at the heart of capitalism itself. The shift would not only revolutionise our political, economical or corporate worlds, but would also have far-reaching

consequences for mental health professions. Capitalism has become hegemonic in Western culture and permeates the mental health field too.

Psychotherapy itself has grown up in a capitalist, patriarchal Western culture that has inevitably left its imprint on it. We are all a product of its influence. Our Western notion of mental health is far from being neutral. What we have come to expect as 'healthy' human behaviour in a capitalist society is intrinsically linked to the dominant norms and values that govern our everyday lives (Rosenthal, 2008). Capitalism has led to an individualising attitude to social issues and a marketisation of health care. In a capitalist society we value individualism over community, ownership over an idea of the commons, and private property over stewardship. We invest in growth models and operate in a competitive climate that tells us that we are masters of our own destiny if we only try hard enough.

The capitalist system requires a certain type of disposition in the general public in order to function (Adams, 2016; James, 2007). For example, the Industrial Revolution has torn us from our contexts. Individuals embedded in a close community and a rich network of reciprocity with the more-than-human world were no longer useful in the machinery of capitalist growth and expansion. Rapid urbanisation processes needed more and more people willing to leave the rural communities they were woven into in exchange for wage labour in cities.

We are all expected to serve the capitalist model, to be motivated to contribute to the economy, to gain satisfaction and identity through a reward system that is removed from primary human needs.

A dictionary definition (Macmillan, 1986) names the following characterisation to describe capitalism:

Accumulation of capital, production for profit and accumulation of capital as the implicit purpose of production; constriction or elimination of production formerly carried out on a common social or private household basis, focus on maximising value, private ownership, wage labour, investment in order to make profit and freedom of capitalists to act in their self-interest. (p. 54)

These culturally promoted characteristics have repercussions on our notion of expected behaviour and therefore also on what we perceive as deviations from the norm.

Psychotherapists are not outside of cultural socialisation. We therefore have to reflect on the values that we perpetuate (consciously or unconsciously) and investigate where our understanding of health may inadvertently contribute to values that risk alienating us even more from each other and our participation with the world.

In the following, I outline aspects of Gestalt therapy that in my opinion need deeper exploration in their uncomfortably close relationship to the dominant capitalist paradigm.

Anthropocentric worldview

In the dominant Western culture we mostly see the world from a perspective that places our species on top of the pile and all else beneath. Our major psychological theories seem to suggest that we are shaped by human relationships alone whilst the more-than-human world is considered irrelevant. But what if we have anthropocentrised our understanding of human development in the absence of our sense of belonging in the world?

The story is not that different in Gestalt psychotherapy despite its holistic perspective. Our therapeutic discourse focuses almost entirely on human-to-human relationships. We do not include the absence of relationship with the living world into our diagnostic thinking of developmental trauma, attachment patterns, personality adaptations and mental health problems. Equally, our notion of community, relationship and kinship usually stops at the threshold of our social network or our own species. It rarely includes our relationship to trees, rivers, mountains, salmon, bees, or water flowing through our bodies. When we talk about loss and bereavement we mostly focus on the loss of people. Rarely does a personal loss include the catastrophic loss of attachment to nature itself, the loss of endangered species, the loss of living in a functioning community, the loss of meaningful rituals or the loss of connection to a place – even though these are losses so deep that they change who we believe we are.

We seem to have become so inflated with our sense of ourselves as a species that we cannot see our actual dependence on that which we are destroying. The cultural historian Thomas Berry (1988) says that we have become autistic to the world. And indeed, our focus on our-selves makes it easy to forget that we do not live in a vacuum.

Perls acknowledges that we have split off from the world and forgotten how to experience our reciprocity with it when he says:

We use a lot of our energy in strategies of either defence against the world by separating ourselves from it or attacking the world by forcing our own will upon it. We have lost the ability of being in communion with it and hence we lessen our ability to act spontaneously in a participatory way. (Perls et al., 1951/1974, p. 449).

For most Westerners, the world around us is experienced as ‘other’ to such an extent that we have become blind to the devastating cost that this tear from

a state of interconnected participation may present to us on a collective basis. The split has become ‘normal’ and therefore does not feature in our therapeutic theories or assessments. The idea that we may share a collective trauma is mainly unexplored. We have paid very little attention to the cultural and personal impoverishment that may ensue from our loss of reciprocal relationships with the more-than-human world.

If our Western society were a client in our consulting room, it would most likely present as a white, middle-class man. As therapists, we would probably view his self-centred, individualistic perspective and his righteous belief in his superiority as dysfunctional and deluded. We would note his lack of empathy, his exploitative relationships and his impoverished materialistic outlook despite his polite and politically correct manner. We would apply the spectrum of our diagnostic criteria to describe his stuck patterns of addiction to consumption, his annihilation of the basis of his own existence, and his ardent pursuit of an idea of happiness he feels he deserves.

The psychotherapist Francis Weller (2015) suggests that many of us carry a deep, but silent grief for our diminished sense of community with a world that we see as alive. We grieve for ‘what it is we expected and did not receive’ (2015, p. 54). And in the absence of connection with a wild, reciprocal world, we seek what we long for in our next of kin. For instance, we look to our parents to provide unconditional love and belonging and many therapy sessions focus on the shortcomings of this expectation. By doing this, we keep the idea alive that this longing can and should be met by our birthparents. The Earth is no longer experienced as Gaia (mother). Instead we look to our actual mothers, or to psychotherapists as the new mothers, to provide the magnitude that may be beyond human beings to provide. We have become literal about our need to be mothered whilst we have killed off and de-sanctified the much bigger feminine principle in our culture. We are looking for something in individual human relationships that may be unattainable whilst we have cut off from a reciprocal relationship with something outside of us.

We have lost access to the ways of weaving ourselves into the ‘web of life’ (Capra, 1996) and we lack humility in relation to other life forms. For most of us, our engagement with the more-than-human world has become an ‘I-It’ relationship (Buber, 1958). And what we do not relate to, we are free to use, manipulate and destroy.

In principle, field theory and our holistic approach stress our interdependence with the field. This field can include anything, but in practice much of our focus in the Gestalt community does not operate outside of this dominant anthropocentric focus. There is a split

between the breadth of our theory and how we chose to frame it.

I believe that we need to critically examine our anthropocentric assumptions in relation to our theories and our notion of reciprocity and relationality. What would it be like to include the quality of our relationship to the natural world in our assessments and our notions of trauma, attachment and fixed gestalts? What is our profession's contribution to transforming the deep intergenerational disconnection from the other-than-human world? How do we un-learn our addiction to consumption? These and other questions need to be taken up in more depth.

Boundary between 'me' and 'not me'

The question where the 'me' is located and where the 'other' begins and ends is at the core of psychological thinking. Where we see the boundary in our community with things determines the way we relate to the world. Most commonly we located this 'me' within and saw the boundary in our physical skin. Postmodernism has deconstructed this rather simplistic idea of a coherent linear self. In Gestalt therapy we acknowledge this and define self as a process at the contact boundary. The 'I' is influenced and shaped by its contact with the world. It is wherever my focus is at any particular time. I can, for example, be so dissociated that my body feels fragmented and 'other'. Or I can be so confluent with someone that it is hard for me to distinguish a sense of self at all. At one point I can focus on my skin and define it as 'me' and a minute later that boundary may extend all the way to the starry sky.

As Gestaltists, we know that we do not have a separate self-identity from the world. There is no clearly defined personal phenomenal field that meets a clearly defined phenomenal field of another. We know that we cannot exist without the presence and health of the interconnecting circles of earthly rhythms. It is impossible to imagine a self that does not include the warming light of the sun, the wind, or animal and plant life. Our theory of self acknowledges this when Perls writes:

Now the 'self' cannot be understood other than through the field, just like day cannot be understood other than by contrast with night. ... So, the 'self' is to be found in the contrast with the otherness. There is a boundary between the self and the other, and this boundary is the essence of psychology. ... Now this contact boundary, to be sure, is nothing rigid. It is something that is always, always moving. There is always something either coming into the foreground or receding. But we always meet. Whether I look at you and my eyes meet a 'picture' that I can't see beyond, whether I hear, whether I feel and touch, always,

where I meet the other there is the boundary. There is awareness. There is experience. (Perls, 1978)

Philippon (2009) describes the permeability of this boundary:

In my image, which comes from Gestalt Therapy, the boundary is a process that separates two areas (using spatial language for what is not just a spatial process) so that the activity on one side is qualitatively different to that on the other side. The boundary both maintains the separation, and allows interchange between the two processes (which are therefore really only one process). The boundary thus *creates* the regions, rather than, like [a] wall, marking pre-existing regions. (p.19, original italics)

The Jungian analyst James Hillman says that:

Since the cut between self and natural world is arbitrary, we can make it at the skin or we can take it as far out as we like – to the deep oceans and distant stars. But the cut is far less important than the recognition of uncertainty about making the cut at all. This uncertainty opens the mind to wonder again, allowing fresh considerations to enter the therapeutic equation. (Hillman, 1995, p. 9)

Alan Boldon (2008) describes the absurdity of the way we think about the environment as 'other' in the attempt to try to decide at which point an apple we eat stops being part of the environment and becomes part of me, or at which point a raindrop that finds its way into the water I drink and then my body, and then out again, is the environment.

The early Gestalt theorists Kohler and Koffka, went far, even by today's perceptions, when they located emotions in the field. Therefore a place or landscape could be sad by its expressive formal gestalt and not because feelings were projected on to it (Hillman, 1995, p. 11).

Our theory acknowledges complexity and in principle already reaches beyond the anthropocentric paradigm. This is implicit, but not explicitly explored in our theory and our practice. The 'emergent self' (Philippon, 2009) is likely to stay a concept applied only to human-to-human interaction until we develop ways to explicitly work with what the Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh (1998) calls 'interbeing' – the essential interconnectedness and interdependence that binds us ever more deeply into the thick of the world.

This would imply that changes in the external world may be as therapeutic as changes in what we perceive to be our internal landscape, or that working on a client's feelings is not more or less therapeutic than working on cleaning a local riverbank.

Hillman writes that:

Perhaps killing weeds on my lawn with herbicides may be as repressive as what I am doing with my childhood

memories. Perhaps the abuses I have unconsciously suffered in my deep interior subjectivity pale in comparison with the abuses going on around me every minute in my ecological surroundings, abuses that I myself commit or comply with. ... The 'bad' place I am 'in' may refer not only to a depressed mood or an anxious state of mind; it may refer to a sealed-up office tower where I work. (1995, p. 19)

Hillman (1995) suggests that the most radical intervention in psychotherapy would be a theory that replaces the individual with the world and that sees treatment of the inner requiring attention to be placed on the outer. This would be a departure from anthropocentrism and a decisive move towards a polycentrist view of life.

Bill Plotkin (2013) proposes that an 'ecocentric' life means that all other memberships, such as primary partnerships, family, social groups, neighbourhood, workplace, profession, ethnic or gender identity group, state or nation become secondary or derivative of the inherent participation in the greater web of life. Our belonging in this web, and the wellbeing and care for this web, become the primary concern and command the greatest loyalty.

I believe that as Gestalt therapists, we already have a wide-ranging theory that allows us to widen our perspective of how self and other intertwine. How does the practical application of this widest aspect of our theory of self impact on our interventions and our response-ability in the work with clients? How may our theory of self inform other parts of the larger system in useful ways?

Privatisation and ownership

We are big on ownership in our culture and are taught to find comfort and identity in what we possess and consume. Even the natural world has become a commodity ready to be used for our benefit. Land is property, real estate, capital, recreation ground or natural resource. We try to possess everything as private property, including ideas, feelings, dreams or what goes on in our own psyches.

As psychotherapists we encourage this sense of ownership by asking clients to 'own' their feelings, thoughts or ideas and talking about them as residing clearly within the client. In doing so our language has a norm of acquisition that separates us from the field context in which a particular feeling emerged. Once we own an idea, we can then extract the maximum potential from it, as if we were eternally hungry for something. 'What do you take from our session today?' 'What can I take from this dream?' We focus on what we think we want and convince ourselves that our needs deserve to be met.

But maybe life calls us to serve something larger than our own individual needs. What we are missing is the quality of intimacy where the focus does not always lie on 'me' but on serving something outside of me and appreciating my participation in a bigger whole. We have forgotten to think as a village or a commons. We do not know anymore how to relativise the self in service of community. Our hegemonic ideology has isolated us out of our sense of belonging to a greater, more meaningful entity than our individual existence. We are so conditioned to the individualistic mindset that we often do not even have ways of imagining a different way of being. And yet, I believe that a communal bond is indigenous to our human nature. We are wired for it.

As therapists our focus on the individualistic paradigm makes us less experienced in allowing something to unfold of what *it* wants to become. An alternative approach would be to put our own lives in a relative position of service, allowing ourselves to surrender to *it*, serving *its* needs and being curious about what *it* wants from us rather than the other way around.

From this perspective we would ask what the dream, the crisis or the relationship asks of the client not how *it* can be beneficial to them. 'What does this situation or problem require of you in order for *you* to do justice to *it*?' 'How can you be of service to the idea that presented itself to you in your dream?'

Can we find in us the willingness to be of service to the things in life that are bigger than our own concerns, our own lifespan or the lifespan of the people we love? And how would we learn to love the land around us as deeply as we love our partners?

We may not be able to learn this from humans but only from a deep engagement with the land itself, an immersion in its rhythms. We do this with our sensual bodies, smelling, sensing, touching and tasting the world. We may need to take our sorrows, dreams and insecurities out into a place we learn to love and see if we come back changed. This would be an aesthetic engagement, which invites participation in something bigger than our individuality. The question we need to address as therapists is how best to facilitate an I-Thou relationship with the world that offers itself to us.

A few examples of psychotherapists working to reconnect clients with the undomesticated natural world can be found in Joanna Macy's work (Macy and Brown, 2014), Nick Totton's *Wild Therapy* (2011), in the ecotherapy movement (Roszak et al., 1995; Rust and Totton, 2012) or Bill Plotkin's Animas Valley Institute (2003). Whilst these are currently still voices from the fringes of our profession, I believe that there is some urgency in Gestalt therapy raising its profile and finding its distinctive voice in the growing chorus.

Individuality

When asked about the role of the more-than-human world in the shaping of humanity, the human biologist Paul Shepard said: ‘The grief and sense of loss, that we often interpret as a failure in our personality, is actually a feeling of emptiness where a beautiful and strange otherness should have been encountered’ (Shepard, 1994, p. 214). In Shepard’s opinion we have lost the continuity of connection to this beautiful and strange otherness to domestication. What follows is an emptiness. We typically blame ourselves for this feeling of emptiness and psychotherapy often colludes with this. Shepard asks us to consider that this emptiness may be the absence of our encounter with the other-than-human world, in which case the feeling is not a personal shortcoming, privately owned, but a healthy reminder of something essential that we have lost.

In a personalised psychology, based on individualism and ownership, we ascribe our feelings of emptiness to a failure in our own personality. The problem becomes interior and we try to fix or eradicate that which is calling out to us from beyond the confines of our individual lives. As we may look in the wrong place, what we are left with is a chronic feeling of emptiness that walks with us wherever we go and that we get so used to that we hardly feel it anymore. And as we often do not even have words for this sense of loss, we learn to anaesthetise our longing.

The psychotherapist Francis Weller (2015) believes that what we are longing for are primary satisfactions, satisfactions that evolved over thousands of years and that our brains are wired for, such as: gathering around communal life, around story, mythology, meaningful relationships, ritual, gathering around fire, around slowly evolving local connections, sharing and preparing food, spending time in nature, being fully embodied, etc. For the most part we have abandoned these primary satisfactions and are now surrounding ourselves with what he calls secondary satisfactions, like individual power, rank, prestige, wealth, status, material goods, stimulants, etc. These are all things that no matter how much we get of them, it will never be enough. We always want more in order to temporarily fill this permeating sense of emptiness that has already depleted the world of its resources. If, on the other hand, this emotional hunger is truly met, we become receptive to reciprocity and gratitude. If we experiment with offering ourselves to the world we may be astonished at what we receive in return. So how do we support clients in daring to reconnect to what truly nourishes them in a culture that sells them the opposite?

The individualistic perspective tells us that we shape our own lives and that it is within our grasp to be

content, unique and accomplished if we only try hard enough. This heroic ideal separates us from community and leaves us wide open to a sense of individual failure when life events do not work out for us. As therapists we risk reinforcing this, by over-attending to a client’s self-interests whilst neglecting a humble attitude of serving something greater than ourselves. It does not have to be an either/or, but the weight lies heavily on one end of the spectrum.

What if our primary human need is not to attend meticulously to our emotional wounds or to eradicate any signs of so called mental health ‘conditions’, but rather to live our flawed and imperfect human wholeness in a participatory way and to embody our fallible existence in deep connection with all that we encounter in the world?

Addiction to progress, growth and self-improvement

In a capitalist society we subscribe to the idea that everything has to progress to something bigger and better. We like things rising – stock markets, profit margins, house prices, whilst we are fearful of depression in the economy or in individuals. We are focused on trying to improve, fix and rectify in our relentless pursuit of happiness. In line with the patriarchal heroic ideal we turn everything into a problem to be overcome, even death.

Aspects of our fallible human experience such as collapse, decay, loss, regression, stillness or stagnation are often approached with a notion of repair. It is therefore maybe not surprising that many clients come to us trying to create a self that is approvable to the world. This agenda is often based on self-hatred and a wish to eradicate the parts in them that stand in the way of the idea of progress and perfection. In our attempts to domesticate that which frightens us, we risk pathologising the aspects in life that refuse to move anywhere or lead us downwards (Weller, 2015). This is the problematic aspect in our notion of healing as opposed to an aesthetic approach that finds beauty in broken places.

The cultural obsession with things rising is often mirrored in psychotherapy when we collude with the idea of perpetual self-improvement or overemphasise the experience of lack and proclaim that there has not been enough parenting, unconditional love, attachment, etc. In the hunger thus created lies the risk that both therapist and client are continually looking for what we can grab to fill up the emptiness (Weller, 2015). From this place, we devour the world without ever being nourished. The focus on our inner longings seems to make us blind to the holes we tear into the fabric of the outer landscape.

Most mythologies tell us that the price for initiation and wisdom has to be paid in the currency of suffering. Our experiences of abandonment, loss, death and betrayal are part of life and what has bound us together over centuries. In many myths all over the world the question is not whether or not our hearts will get broken, the question is what meaning we ascribe to a broken heart. Do we follow the culturally dominant path of hunting for personal happiness or do we educate our hearts and allow them to be broken, so that the world can flow into us?

In order to take in the enormity of devastation that we have caused in the world, we need to know how to allow our hearts to break. In mythology an educated heart often comes through the gateway of rupture, as a certain level of pain and our ability to bear it is the vehicle that allows us to cross threshold moments. How can we facilitate this process in our clients when we are steeped in a grief-phobic culture?

Materialism

I remember a Gestalt therapy session many years ago in which I expressed deep grief over a desolate landscape that I had visited that day. I expressed disgust at what we are doing to ourselves and the land we live on. After an exploration of where I felt this in my body, my experience was explored as a projection on to the world. This is a worthwhile avenue to take but it is a much trodden path. The phenomenological exploration of my experience as perception or a dialogic encounter with place is extremely rare. This avenue would open up questions about the way we see the world. Is what is out there dead matter or in some way able to communicate and reciprocate? Is the fact that we do not hear anything when we contact the world proof that there is no other consciousness than human consciousness or a sign that we have forgotten how to listen to a different language?

The existence of non-human subjectivity is what indigenous cultures have lived by for millennia, but which ours has eradicated a long time ago. However, the question about matter holding consciousness is no longer a concern of freaks and New Age hippies. It is at the cutting edge of the current scientific debate (Koch, 2004). In philosophy, the concept of panpsychism, for instance, holds the view that consciousness is a universal feature of all things (Bruntrup and Jaskolla, 2017).

The paradigm shift that we may be faced with may not be an either/or, but seems to ask for a wider road that can hold a bigger section of the polarity. We may continue to view subjectivity as only residing in human nature or we may expand our view of the field and consider the possibility of a subjectivity in animals, plants, waterways, trees, rocks. We are still a long way

away from this, but do we, as Gestalt therapists, have anything to say about this?

Lack of a mythological and cosmological dimension

Descartes made the world dead. Everything has become solid matter. As opposed to our ancestors we no longer feel at home with the mystical, divine or the numinous. We seem to have replaced our human need for mythology and transcendence with materialism, which means that most Westerners can no longer take their sorrows to a bigger entity.

Cosmology and mythology traditionally place the human experience in a wider context, but with the loss of connection to our mythological and cosmological ground we have become self-referential. It all becomes about our own personalised and exceptional life. Our focus seems to fall only on us. This risks creating a culture of literalness that becomes blind to that which is not tangible and dismisses meaning that is outside of our cognitive realm of reason.

There are few exceptions in psychotherapy that break with this norm, but they are often looked down upon. In Jungian psychology the ideas of soul, archetypes and the collective unconscious transcend the merely human realm and ascribe agency to forces and presences outside of human control. Hillman (1995) suggests that if we want to live soulful lives we have to look outside of ourselves and engage with the '*anima mundi*', the soul of the world. For him, the *anima mundi* is an entity in its own right that acts upon us and asks us to participate in its dance.

As Gestalt therapists we may agree or disagree with the Jungian perspective, but it puts forward a view of the world that transcends the material and individualised perspective of the Western mind.

In Gestalt therapy the notion of a dialogic relationship is based on the work of Martin Buber (1958), who sees the premise of existence as encounter (Buber, 1947/2002). Buber's work was based on religious consciousness. He argued that an I-Thou relationship with anything or anyone connects us in some way with the eternal relation to God. In order to experience an I-Thou relationship with God, we have to be open to it, as opposed to pursuing it (which would turn it into an I-It relationship). Buber claims that if we are open, God will eventually come to us and respond to our openness. It seems to me that we have largely taken Buber's thinking and left God out of our notion of the dialogic encounter. We don't talk much about God in Gestalt psychotherapy.

Equally, our theory is influenced by Zen Buddhism and yet the transpersonal aspect of Buddhist philosophy is not explicit in much of our work. There are a few

exceptions, but the discourse is discordant. Some writers consider a concept of transcendence being part of the field (Brownell, 2010; Naranjo, 1978), whilst others believe that Gestalt therapy and spirituality are two separate concepts (Au, 1991). The lack of a more coherent exploration of what lies in the space between the 'me' and the 'not me' seems to suggest that many therapists do not share the same ground. We leave it up to individuals to decide whether or not they put a third entity in between. As in the wider culture, it has become a matter of personal taste and opinion.

This lack of a cosmological and transpersonal perspective opens us up to the risk of practising a wild mix-and-match of individualised preferences. In our insatiable hunger we often appropriate other cultures' cosmologies and risk ending up like consumers; taking whatever fills our longing for now and discarding what we do not like. We try Buddhism, shamanism, yoga, Sufism, etc., in the knowledge that we do not have to commit to any of it. We feel entitled to decontextualise that which is sacred to others. Only a few people are willing to surrender to something bigger.

In the absence of a transpersonal perspective, how do we learn to approach the world with a sense of wonder? What rituals guide us? How can we elicit a sense of what is sacred to clients and where does our moral compass come from? Whom or what do we serve if there is nothing that deserves our humility?

Conclusion

In this article I outlined how anthropocentrism as well as the capitalist values of individualism, materialism, privatisation, ownership, progress, and growth are reflected in our notion of mental health and the practice of psychotherapy in general, including Gestalt therapy. I highlighted that psychotherapists risk reinforcing a culturally endemic I-It relationship to the world. I argue that Gestalt theory already lends itself to widen our notion of the field, but in order to build on the strengths of Gestalt theory and practice we have to make our voices explicit, rise beyond the individualistic paradigm and widen our theory and practice.

When it comes to transitioning out of the deep rupture we have torn between us and the world, there are no rules, no maps and hardly any elders to look to. We need to decide where to steer the boat, and so it is up to us to step out of our comfort zones and act in service of something that is greater than us.

When alarm bells are repeatedly ignored, the only way to wake up is through crisis. Is that where we are heading? Some people suggest that we are at the beginning of a major paradigm shift – a time of transition between the world as we have known it and a new world that we cannot know yet. In such a time it

is easy to feel disheartened and to dismiss what we have to contribute.

Clarissa Pinkola Estes, a teacher of mine, reminds us that:

Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach ... It is not given to us to know which acts or by whom, will cause the critical mass to tip toward an enduring good. What is needed for dramatic change is an accumulation of acts, adding, adding to, adding more ... When a great ship is in harbour and moored, it is safe, there can be no doubt. But that is not what great ships are built for. (Estes, n.d.)

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