

## ***Dialogues on Psychotherapy at the Time of Coronavirus: An Introduction***

Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb

### **Abstract**

This report provides a framework of the special section titled “Dialogues on Psychotherapy at the Time of Coronavirus”. Twelve prominent Gestalt psychotherapists and trainers from different parts of the world were invited to discuss their pandemic experience by the Istituto di Gestalt HCC Italy–Postgraduate School of Psychotherapy recognized by the Italian Ministry of University and Research. The webinar, organized on May 15-16, 2020, hosted 850 participants from all over the world, who were able to reflect on how to improve their skills as psychotherapists in this time of global trauma, and to transform this momentous event into an opportunity for growth. New humanistic values emerged from their dialogue: a shift from supporting the development of personal power to the new value of being-with and recognizing the other. This discussion revealed how Gestalt psychotherapy, with its perspective on the self as a process that takes place at the contact boundary with the environment, and its relational soul that looks at the cocreation between therapist and client, can contribute significantly to this turning point. The presenters have reported in this section their personal, clinical and theoretical reflections offered during the webinar. Their aim can be expressed with the question: “How can we recount to our children what we are living with a sense of beauty and courage, so that they can move forward in their own lives, relying on a safe and meaningful foundation?”.

*Keywords:* Coronavirus, Gestalt therapy, Istituto di Gestalt HCC Italy, humanistic values, psychotherapy and society.

## ***Hope, Dread, and Dignity When “Now for Next” Has Collapsed***

Lynne Jacobs

### **Abstract**

This report draws on insights from contemporary Gestalt therapy and intersubjective psychoanalysis to examine the relationship between the felt sense of hope, dread, and dignity in a dialogic therapeutic process. Both schools of thought emphasize the relationship of hope and dread in the dialogic process, and this report explores working how a sense of dignity emerges from working with hope and dread dialogically. Hope and dread vacillate in the process of a therapy relationship as the patient reaches for their dignity through truthful, agentic dialogue. The restoration of dignity during the coronavirus shutdown process has moved from background to foreground in our therapeutic conversations.

*Keywords:* Dignity, hope and fear, Coronavirus, Gestalt psychotherapy, dialogue.

## ***Developing Presence Online***

Ruella Frank

### **Abstract**

During the early days of Coronavirus quarantine, my supervision students described a loss of their sense of presence; the capacity to “feel their patients” as they abruptly shifted their practices from meeting in person to online. This article explores the moving-feeling foundation required for a developing presence as it emerges or is thwarted within both the child-parent and patient-therapist dyad (Frank, 2001; Frank and LaBarre, 2011; Frank, 2016). Drawing on phenomenologists Edmund Husserl (1913/1980) and Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (1999; 2019), who theorize about the consequence of a kinesthetic foundation for receptivity, I here discuss how therapists can re-discover a sense of wonder, the pre-requisite for developing presence in themselves and their patients, and in doing, clear the obstacles that prevent each from receiving the other. Experiential components illustrate how to enhance the experience of presence.

*Keyword:* Presence, kinetic, kinesthetic, qualities of movement, sense of wonder.

## ***Gestalt Therapy During Coronavirus: Sensing the Experiential Ground and “Dancing” with Reciprocity***

Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb

### **Abstract**

Building on the social experiences that have formed the backdrop to the pandemic, some of the relational dimensions that have come to the forefront today are described. The need for a new set of values in humanistic psychology is addressed, from support for individual potential to building a sense of “being-with” the other, embracing a more relational perspective. The author proposes looking to the paradigm of reciprocity, applied through an aesthetic approach and inspired by gestalt hermeneutics (phenomenological and field oriented), and presents aesthetic relational knowledge (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2017a) as a means of working through the suffering of the client in a contextualized way, considering the resonance of the therapist as part of the experiential field of the client. This new humanistic value can be realized by focusing on the “dance” of reciprocity between the therapist and the client (a model under research that considers mutual perceptions and reactions to the perceptions of the other, supported by the vitality that each one places in being-with the other). In this way, therapeutic change can include both figure and ground experiences. A consequence of this new value is a turn in the ethical position of the psychotherapist: from a

narcissistic effort to be a “good therapist” to an aesthetic attitude that doesn’t deny limits and puts the presence of the other in the foreground. An important consequence for therapists is to take care of themselves so that they are able to deal with the trauma of the pandemic, which is also strengthened through constant dialogue with the professional community.

*Keywords:* Coronavirus, aesthetic relational knowledge, gestalt therapy, reciprocity, humanistic values.

## ***Fear, Self-Support, and “Good Introjects”***

Bernd Bocian

### **Abstract**

Talking about a collective trauma in the current situation means for the author to underestimate what a collective trauma means. He refers to the two world wars and the Middle East, where people are living under bombs and at risk of their life for years. The trauma in our situation is individual and depends on health, social class, work, and especially our ability to react. The author underlines the importance of the therapist’s self-care and the concept of self-support, which was important for Fritz and Lore Perls, founders of Gestalt therapy, because it reflects their survival experiences (war trauma, Shoa, emigration). This means: the ability to mobilize my own resources in moments of danger and when I might be alone. The text emphasizes in this context the importance of our inner (psychic) world and especially of the introjects, that had a negative connotation for Perls and which he sometimes called “inner demons.” The author suggests the idea of good introjects or “inner protectors,” which are representations of internalized positive self-other relationships (holding introjects) as part of the self-support-system in crisis situations.

*Keywords:* Fritz Perls, self-support, internalization, “demons and protectors”, holding introjects.

## ***Intentionality: The Fabric of Relationality***

Dan Bloom

### **Abstract**

The Coronavirus pandemic is a world-historical event. We live in a post-Coronavirus world. This paper addresses how Gestalt Therapy’s concepts of intentionality, contacting and relationality come together as the intentionality of contacting that form the fabric of relationality. These concepts are presented from a clinical phenomenological and personal perspective of the author in New York City at the height of the pandemic. This article is an adaptation of a May 16, 2020, presentation at the online conference “Dialogues on Psychotherapy at the Time of Coronavirus”, sponsored by Istituto di Gestalt HCC- Italy.

*Keywords:* Gestalt Therapy, contacting, intentionality, relationality, Covid.

## ***Collective Trauma and the Relational Field***

Miriam Taylor

### **Abstract**

Taken from a whole field perspective, this paper considers some of the factors and processes that form the ground from which collective experiences may be constructed as being traumatic. The history of pandemics sheds light on the current Coronavirus pandemic, in which we see these processes repeated, as is the nature of trauma. Changes in our ways of being in the world (Herman, 1992), and with one another, especially when working in an unfamiliar space are viewed through the lens of meeting, contact and disconnection.

*Keywords:* Collective trauma, situation, contact, safety, retraumatization.

## ***Buddhist Psychology Informed Gestalt Therapy for Challenging Times***

Eva Gold e Stephen Zahm

### **Abstract**

This paper is based on an invited talk that was part of the international webinar *Dialogues on Psychotherapy at the Time of Coronavirus* presented by Istituto di Gestalt HCC Italy. The talk was on the Buddhist Psychology informed Gestalt Therapy (BPGT) approach developed by the authors. It included a brief overview of BPGT then focused on one aspect of it. During this global pandemic, psychotherapists are in need of new resources and perspectives to support us in our work and to meet the challenges patients are now bringing to the therapeutic encounter. The BPGT approach has particular relevance in this time of unprecedented crisis when humanity is being confronted on a daily basis with the universal challenges directly addressed in Buddhist psychology. These include Buddhist psychology's understanding of the reality of impermanence, how this relates to suffering, and ways to identify and work with this suffering, as we described in the talk and present here.

*Keywords:* Buddhism, Gestalt, Mindfulness, compassion, transformation.

## ***Only the Living Can Witness the Passing of Death: Mourning in Times of Pandemic***

Carmen Vázquez Bandín

### **Abstract**

This report presents the special characteristics of the psychotherapy process with patient who are grieving the loss of a loved one.

Because of the special background circumstances in which these losses have occurred – the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the 3-month lockdown because of –, I have called these griefs suspended.

In the article I offer the social background circumstances, the personal circumstances of the loss, and the therapeutic intervention with the special characteristics for both the therapist and the therapeutic setting.

Finally, I offer some specific tools for working with this type of grief. All these considerations are made from the approach of Gestalt therapy as well as with the working model proposed by Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. This is coupled with my experience of more than 20 years in psychotherapeutic work with people who are living a grieving process.

*Keywords:* Grief, pandemic, loneliness, suffering, therapeutic bond.

## ***A Gestalt Therapy Reading of the Pandemic***

Pietro Andrea Cavaleri

### **Abstract**

The article aims to give a reading of the pandemic from a Gestalt perspective. It analyses first of all the background from which it emerges and its complexity. It is defined as a sick planet (Pievani, 2019) in need of new forms of sustainability (see Bellina, 2019). Human vulnerability, made still more actual by COVID-19, is then proposed by the author as a permanent existential condition (Foucault, 2005), capable however of generating new creative adaptations and new potentials (Perls *et al.*, 1951). Placed in this frame of meaning, the pandemic can be a challenge for every single person and for larger communities.

*Keywords:* Figure, ground, emergency, vulnerability, adaptive strategies.

## ***Experiment: Aesthetics and Reciprocity in Contemporary Clinical Practice***

Luca Pino

### **Abstract**

This paper offers reflections on the use of experiment in the contemporary Gestalt clinical practice. In the section “Phenomenology and experiment”, the author focuses on the phenomenological “turn” in Gestalt therapy in terms of its relational and experimental approach. Building on current developments and studies on Relational Aesthetic Knowledge and reciprocity in psychotherapy (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2017a; 2017b; 2020), she presents the use of experiment as meaningful possibility of the phenomenological field and not as a rigid, technique imposed upon experience. The epistemological and therapeutic focus is aimed at contact and self in contact. Today, experiment can be one of the ways to insert “novelty” in the therapeutic process by using the typical aesthetic and phenomenological tools of Gestalt therapy. In particular, the author wants to define the experiment in a relational and field perspective so that the experiment’s objective is not so much a cathartic experience, but a relational experience at the contact-boundary. This involves recontextualizing an important theme of Gestalt epistemology by purging it of a theatrical dimension and bringing it back both to the theory of self and to the needs and suffering that patients bring to therapy today. In particular, the author offers a non-technical vision of the use of the experiment based on the creativity and originality that each therapist tries to put into their work. From the theoretical point of view, the author focuses on both the phenomenological and the aesthetic aspects that are used to propose an experiment. Finally, she offers some guidelines for therapists to orient themselves in their experimental work. The article is also intended for therapists in training in order to help them understand the epistemological framework of the way of intervening in Gestalt therapy and the fine line between therapeutic and technical art.

*Keywords:* Contact, experiment, self-theory, reciprocity, technique.