I shall attempt to show how the ethos of Gestalt therapy is more relevant today than ever before. Gestalt therapy was prepared for the 21\textsuperscript{st} century nearly 60 years ago, when Perls, Hefferline and Goodman published \textit{Gestalt Therapy} in 1951. Arguably, Gestalt therapy’s post-modern credentials were already established in this now-classic book. Questions of the social order and community, illness and health, deviance and normalcy, assessment and diagnosis, and the relationships among intervention, economics and politics, are considered from within an anthology of original and unique deliberations.

Drawing on the prevailing knowledge of social, psychological and anthropological understanding, \textit{Gestalt Therapy} was a new and influential configuration of many disparate and distinctive ideas. Perhaps most importantly, Gestalt therapy introduced an epistemology to psychology that challenges the prevailing mechanistic, technical and outcome-oriented approaches of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. In other words, Gestalt therapy was not only advanced for the 1950s – it is advanced even for the new millennium.

1 \textbf{The next inquisition}

Globalization and scientism

We are in the early stages of a modern inquisition. We now find ourselves in a “brave New World”, with the advent of contemporary globalization, vast changes in community relations and transformations in the significance of social institutions. This new world is narrowly defined by a questionable set of beliefs that constrain one’s vision of humanity to a set of rationales that is
defined by technology ("scientism") and globalization ("free-market economics"). We live in an upside-down world where tools and gadgets make the person – rather than the other way around.

Psychology is not free from this topsy-turvy turnabout and has come under the influence of globalization and scientism in the form of the “medical model”. The authority of the medical model, with its cures for various illnesses and its place of prestige in the hierarchy of social values, is sanctioned by an epistemology that defends the mechanistic, technical and outcome-oriented approaches of the 20th century. “Medical psychology”, under the influence of positivistic science came to be the benchmark of good psychology, in concert with psychoanalysis, behaviorism and the “human potential movement”. Under the auspices of this medical model, the goal of psychotherapy has essentially remained to provide relief, or change, through cure by the “expert-practitioner” (depth and behavior-oriented psychologies), or an understanding of how to change oneself with help/direction from a therapist (humanistic psychologies). Globalization and scientism are two of the implications of the epistemological and ontological arrangements that support the “medical model”.

Instead of benefitting the general populations of countries around the world, globalization has benefitted the strong and wealthy economies at the expense of developing and underdeveloped economies. These shifts are not only in the realm of highly industrialized nations towards lesser industrialized countries, but also play out within the wealthy countries, where the reality of a shrinking “middle class” develops together with greater poverty and disenfranchisement. A shrinking middle class, for example, is a result of the movement of jobs from stable communities to those places that provide cheaper labor. This is commonly referred to as a “free trade agreement” – but what it really amounts to is a “free investment agreement”.

No sane person is opposed to globalization, that is, international integration. Surely not the left and the workers movements, which were founded on the principle of international solidarity – that is, globalization in a form that attends to the rights of people, not private power systems.¹

This movement of power away from people and communities towards conglomerates and big business is repeated at micro and macro levels. An effect of this shift is that globalization

¹ Noam Chomsky: Znet May 07, 2002 / The Croatian Feral Tribune April 27, 2002
rapidly destroys the fragile fabric of communities that do not have the resources to contain or combat its negative consequences. Community relations are stripped of their shared and communal spirit; people are disembodied in a ghostly ethereal world of machinations where their role is gradually reduced to that of being mere providers of services from which they do not benefit. Social institutions that were originally established to protect human discourse and intercourse are becoming limited to commercial, trade and technological interests.

The dominant propaganda systems have appropriated the term "globalization" to refer to the specific version of international economic integration that they favor, which privileges the rights of investors and lenders, those of people being incidental.  

Globalization has also placed the politics of personal identity at the forefront of modern psychology. Governments and government surrogates demand compliance from professional mental health workers with the rules of globalization that benefit the wealthy and the powerful. Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs), Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) and government agencies that oversee health and environmental issues have followers for whom the preservation of the institution is more important than the service it affords the public domain. Refusing their “for-profit” mandate is economic suicide which is roughly the modern equivalent of heresy.

Science, that great engine of egalitarianism and influence for decency, which led the way out of the last inquisition, has been usurped by and for a powerful minority. It no longer serves the general interests of the people, but the will of a few. Marked by a “technical rationality”, scientism has been “stupendously successful in promoting the machine world”. Science has morphed into “scientism”. “Scientism” and its little brother, “technicism”, have become the siblings of control, coercion and compulsion, bullying their way through the core of rational thinking. The new science, as Anderson describes it,

…is a world where massive amounts of data and applied mathematics replace every other tool that might be brought to bear. Out with every theory of human behavior, from

---

2 Noam Chomsky: Interview by Sniježana Matejčić, June 2005 en 2.htm
3 Parlett, 1991:75
linguistics to sociology. Forget taxonomy, ontology and psychology…There is now a better way. Petabytes allow us to say: ‘Correlation is enough.’ This Petabyte age can dispense with models, “…it forces us to view data mathematically first and establish a context for it later”⁶. It is noteworthy how the Petabyte age forces us, like the inquisitors of the past, to ignore context, chronicle and culture. Thus, science has been reduced to scientism in the face of globalization and its demands. Rescuing us from the inquisitions of the dark and middle ages, science has now allowed the same evil force to usurp the human enterprise. Numbers “speak for themselves” and people are irrelevant for understanding the human endeavor/condition. Context, culture and conventions are for dreamers.

Who knows why people do what they do? The point is that they do it, and we can track and measure it with unprecedented fidelity. With enough data, the numbers speak for themselves.⁷

Professional mental health workers stack up their 13-session cures and other nonsense to compete in the “marketplace of ideas” for customers/consumers. Financial viability is the primary goal in this marketplace – before the needs of the client.

In summary, globalization has contributed decisively to the destruction of many human communities, leading us further and further away from a good that benefits the many. In addition, the morphing of science into scientism and technicism now leads to confrontation and even criticism of the notion of healing. Modernistic views of science, together with globalization, amount to an intimidating combination of control, power and compulsion. Taken together, they constitute an authority with a grand ability to define and delineate veracity and truth without much consideration for human experience or imagination. Perhaps even more than any other vocation, the mental health worker has a duty to maintain the human rights of all people in the face of such assaults on our communities.

2 Essentials of Gestalt Therapy: a model for growth

Field theory, Phenomenology, Dialogue, Change, Process

---

Gestalt Therapy challenges established notions of normalcy and illness and proposes an autonomous criterion of health. The authors suggest that the world and the person are in continuous relatedness and each is subject to influence, change and growth by the other. It is the primacy of field theory, which includes the concepts of holism and organismic self-regulation; phenomenology and dialogue – the three pillars supporting the standpoint of Gestalt therapy – that is the basis for a comprehensive process model of organismic growth. Growth by way of relatedness becomes the embodiment of personal and collective experience. Growth initially evolves from and then builds on human experience, and returns repeatedly to confer unwavering power and authority on human experience. It is this unvarying return to originality that makes Gestalt therapy a design for our times.

2.1 Field theory, phenomenology and dialogue

The organism/environment field is a foundational building block of the Gestalt therapy model. Gestalt therapy introduced the notion of field theory in the context of the organism and its environment. The organism and its environment are situated within a context called a “field”. The constant ongoing process of identifying and satisfying an organismic need is called organismic self-regulation. Organismic self-regulation occurs at the point of contact between the organism and its environment. Essentially, an organismic need organizes the figure, and the relationship between the figure and its ground arranges the field. The contact boundary, the location of experience that occurs between the organism and its environment, is the site of growth, transforming the unknown into the known.

Gestalt therapy has been described as “experimental, experiential and existential.” Gestalt Therapy has adopted a phenomenological approach for describing experience. Its explication of consciousness and current experience was, in part, also a reaction to the prevailing (mid 19th C) interpretive approaches of the “depth psychologies” of Freud, Jung and their followers. Gestalt therapy has adopted a pragmatic approach to using the investigative method of Brentano and Husserl to describing and understanding relevant subjective experientially-based phenomena. Using the principles of horizontalization, bracketing (epoché), and description to define its

---

13 REFERENCE???. Lore Perls??
method, phenomenology attempts to describe experience as accurately as possible, rather than explaining or interpreting what is being experienced.\textsuperscript{14}

Contact is an experience of differentness that both separates and connects. The experience of difference is essential for connection. There is no sense of connectedness without a concomitant sense of difference. This touching of difference is called \textit{awareness} in Gestalt therapy and the engagement of these differences is called \textit{contact}. In other words, \textit{movement} leads to \textit{difference} which leads to \textit{awareness} which leads to \textit{contact}. Change and growth takes place in the contact (engagement of difference) between the organism and its environment\textsuperscript{15}.

The development of Gestalt Therapy theory to embrace more fully the implied social anthropology of Martin Buber leads to a greater emphasis on the conditions for relatedness when contact happens – in other words, the engagement of two phenomenologies. This “dialogic encounter” has become the touchstone for healing in Gestalt Therapy. Buber contrasts this “I-Thou” engagement of two phenomenologies with the everydayness of the “I-It” relationship that occurs between a subject and an object. The “I-It” relationship is purely instrumental, with an interest only in the outcome of the interaction. The “I-Thou” relationship is intrinsically valuable – not for any strategic outcome.

Buber makes the crucial ontological point that existential priority is in and through the “I-Thou” relationship – i.e. it is only through this form of relatedness that one’s humanity is realized. The “I-Thou” relationship is primary and foundational for community and human life.

\subsection{2.2 Change}

Change – that ubiquitous term which is used to dispense hope to the disenfranchised – has become the prerogative jingle of the privileged. The idea that “leadership” controls change and offers direction is placed in the modern psyche as an unassailable fact. Gestalt Therapy long ago pointed out the participatory nature of change, its characteristic to occur spontaneously, and the

\textsuperscript{14} Spinelli, 1994, pp161-162.
\textsuperscript{15} I am grateful to Robert Resnick for this brief discussion from contact to dialogue, presented as a lecture at GATLA SR Vilnius July, 2008.
role of leadership as facilitator of change – not originator\textsuperscript{16, 17, 18}. A good number of psychotherapists buy into the idea of being “change agents” rather than facilitators of self-regulation and growth. Leaders need to be facilitators of change; encouraging participatory decision-making. Good leadership is at ease with this process of resourcefulness and creativity that leads to self-regulation liberated from orthodoxy and conformity\textsuperscript{19, 20, 21}.

From the standpoint of Gestalt therapy, movement and change is inevitable and leads to either growth or stagnation of the organism. Organismic preferences and field conditions determine the result of change. Change is a lifelong process according to Gestalt therapy, extending and modifying the views of Freud and Jung. Gestalt Therapy expands Freud’s perspective of development beyond the so-called “genital stage” and elaborates Jung’s view of lifelong individuation of consciousness into a process conception of organismic growth.

### 2.3 “Here-and-now” process: the “contact episode”

Polster and Polster (1974) refer to the process of organism/environment adjustment as a “contact episode”. A contact episode is marked by situatedness, temporality, irreversibility, and growth (or stagnation).

Gestalt therapy is also known as the “here-and-now” therapy. The ‘here’ part of Gestalt therapy refers to its situatedness in the world. The organism/environment contact boundary is marked by change and growth that incorporates the unknown into the known. The non-personal environment is personalized and incorporated into support through contact. Contact “grounds” the organism in its history and situation.

The “now” part of Gestalt therapy refers to temporality. Time is measured by change, change is measured by difference, and difference is measured by contact. Typically, a contact episode has

a beginning, middle, and an end. These temporal moments are discernible by 1) the initial experience of a need; 2) the accurate identification of the need; 3) recognizing and modifying the resources that will meet the need in an assimilable form for the organism; and 4) the organismic satisfaction of the need and its incorporation as support for further contact.

Irreversibility is another attribute of a contact episode. Change implies irreversibility – for better or worse. The process of Gestalt therapy is not a rehearsal for practicing what needs to be performed “outside” of the consultation. The embodiment of organismic self-regulation in a contact episode is not dummy run without consequences (for both therapist and client). In other words, the problem in doing the therapy IS the problem. Growth is marked by increasing capacities of the contact boundary to differentiate and assimilate what is non-personal into what is personal. Each contact episode, leading to growth or stagnation, becomes incorporated (assimilated and accommodated) into the background for the next emerging figure of the need and imbues that new figure with renewed meaning and significance.

3 Healing and community

Habitation, rehabilitation and healing

Where Freud saw darkness and despair in his notion of the unconscious, brought about by a black political outlook, Jung saw light and hope engendered by spirituality. Since then, the eclipse of both politics and spirituality from the domain of mainstream psychotherapy has toughened over the years. Goodman, however, has championed a distinctive perspective in pointing out that many human issues that recur may be deeply personal, but they are not private, being driven by forces “located in the institutions of society, the economic and political institutions, the moral, religious, educational and domestic institutions.” His central observation and assertion is that the organismic need or “instinct” is never the problem, a perspective gained from Reich. How these needs become obscured, repressed, shamed, guilt-ridden or fraught with

---

23 Resnick, “What gets in the way of the therapy IS the therapy…”
24 Wheeler, Gestalt Reconsidered
26 Goodman, Nature Heals:88
anxiety through the actions of a repressive society and social institutions is the issue. Hence – personal but not private.

Gestalt therapy is more than just an attempt at remediation and cure: it pursues the goals of *healing* and *rehabilitation* through *growth*. The loss of the time-honored idea of psychotherapy as the study and healing of the soul should not go unchallenged. Our modern and post-modern society demands a change of perspective from that of the white-coated doctor immersed in the medical model, which has failed so dismally to address the health needs of people and the politics and spirituality of healing. Healing has been reduced to cure, and rehabilitation reduced to a technological intervention. F. S. Perls challenged the medical model notion of sickness when he wrote in 1969: “I now consider that neurosis is not a sickness but one of several symptoms of growth stagnation.”

Gestalt Therapy’s holistic approach avers that the whole is more/greater than the sum of its parts. This tendency for growth to include an emergent quality of contact and relationship precludes a reductionist perspective of the elements of healing. Gestalt Therapy is ready to articulate this change from heroic utilitarianism to reverent hospitality. This involves a withdrawal of projections and a shift from telling to listening.

In this case the transformational awakening of interiority involves the shift from habitually speaking at the world in terms of one’s anthropocentric (egoic) needs and anxieties to listening to the things and people that speak (whisper, cry, shout) the calls and meanings of one’s life. ...the shift from speaking to listening realises one’s capacity for faith, which, as Holt put it, ‘is the activity which lets the world be, which allows Presence to sound’.

Perls makes a similar (although less poetically-inspired) remark when he writes that:

The "I'm telling you what you need" would be replaced by "I'm listening for what you want", and the basis for rational discussion would be opened ... This applies as much to our inner conflicts as it applies to the world situation in general.

---

28 Zinker, In search of Good Form:5
29 Introduction to the 1971 Bantam edition of Gestalt Therapy
30 Brooke:117
Organismic growth, or, in Jung’s terms, individuation of consciousness, is a process of ingathering and appropriation of the possibilities of the world. This ongoing lifetime process of individuation “does not shut one out from the world but gathers the world to oneself”. This individuation of consciousness (in Jung’s terms), … participates freely in the wider world of objective interests. This widened consciousness … is a function of relationship to the world of objects, bringing the individual into absolute, binding, and indissoluble communion with the world at large.32

Gestalt therapy elaborates Jung’s concept of growth as individuation of consciousness into a view of organismic growth as a lifelong task. This view can inspire, stimulate and encourage a different vision of human nature, away from heroic utilitarianism, toward a more humane image of and for the future. In other words, Gestalt therapy is uniquely predisposed and ready to cultivate our humanity and humanize our culture in our brave new world.

Growth is a process of identifying and satisfying an organismic need. Initially, the field is composed of pre-personal and impersonal features of the environment. The newborn infant, for example, is not attuned to the impact of its digestive system on itself and the world. These “internal” pre-personal processes become assimilated through experience at the contact boundary. What was initially “not-me” (e.g. “my” awareness of “my” digestive system and ability to identify hunger, as well as the need for excretion, the effects of gravity on “my” kinesthetic awareness and ability to walk, the experience of “my” capacity to manipulate objects with “my” limbs) becomes personalized as “me” as a result of assimilation of experiences. The impersonal characteristics of the environment (simply, those characteristics and qualities of the environment that exist initially outside of awareness and “outside of the skin”) become personalized through contact and experience. This includes everything commonly attributed to the “outside” (including, for example, but not limited to, culture, architecture, food, objects used to manipulate the environment, etc.). Perhaps most importantly, the impersonal environment refers initially to the primary caregivers and their support system, their community and their world-at-large.

32 Jung, quoted in Brooke, 19**:106.
This ongoing assimilation and accommodation (“ingathering and appropriation”) by the organism of the non-personal aspects of the environment is called growth. Latner refers to this process of growth as “befriending the field”.

This is, in a way, a process of continually befriending aspects of the field. As we are involved in the coming figure and its resolution, we put parts of ourselves in an interaction with other parts of the field – other people, plants, animals, objects. In this interaction, they are inside our self-boundaries. We are identified with them. Our relationship with them is no longer (in Buber’s terms) one of I and It; it becomes one of I and Thou. In this way, we assimilate the field, changing it by changing our relation to it.\footnote{Latner, 1974:78}

Gestalt therapy invokes a place of habitation or, in some instances, rehabilitation. Rehabilitation provides a dwelling and a sense of belonging and of purpose in the world. Healing and rehabilitation are two sides of the same coin. There cannot be healing without rehabilitation and there cannot be rehabilitation without healing. Rehabilitation appeals to and summons up a place of belonging, a place to inhabit. However, this is not literally a geographical place, but a metaphorical location for the dwelling of one’s existence in its transformative journey throughout individuation and growth. Organismic growth and self-regulation is a task to be achieved over a lifetime, and not a given:

> Envisioning a world where freedom to act is bestowed or guaranteed rather than \textit{achieved} is, regrettably, wishful thinking, utopian and non-contactful.\footnote{Polster and Polster, 1974:103, italics in original}

\textit{In other words, growth includes the ability of the organism to create (together with its environment) a place where the needs and the resources for life converge to provide a place of human habitation.}

A healer for our times is required to care for the environment and the community, by addressing political and socio-economic issues like global warming and institutional reform, as much as questions involving neurons of the brain. Although political work is more than therapy, therapy is certainly political\footnote{Doubrawa, Martin Buber, the anarchist, p 9}. Attending to both pre-personal and impersonal aspects of the world that we inhabit are equally important for the successful execution of a healing process.
This process of constantly expanding awareness amounts to a sense of wholeness, constituted as an aesthetic existence that is grounded in a subjective, intuitive and metaphorical tradition. Latner distinguishes between scientific perspectives and the Gestalt point of view. “There is no point pursuing the idea of the field in Gestalt therapy if it is going to rest on science. Frightening though it may be, experience and imagination are our bedrock.”  

40 From the Gestalt perspective, organismic growth is an aesthetic expression of values that cares for both the organismic needs and its environment. As Zinker 41 observes,

… there is an aesthetic side to all human interaction and every therapeutic style … Thus there is an ‘aesthetics of psychotherapy’ as well as an ‘aesthetics of human interaction,’ since aesthetics is dedicated to the study of the expression of values.

A sick environment and community is just as debilitating for the person as a sick body or brain. If, in the course of growth, we are to be seriously committed to “befriending the field”, then we need to also be seriously committed to protecting and invigorating the field. As Doubrawa 42 points out, “…a healing therapeutic relationship is not all it takes to heal lives. It takes a healthy society where healing through meeting is intended and wanted”. In addressing the psychopathology of social adjustment that permeates our current treatment and relational options, Goodman asks rhetorically, “Who can deny that the only practical mass method is to strike at the institutions and inhibiting mores and to give our sick generation, if not an era of peace, at least a war of liberation?” 43

The activity of psychotherapy is an invitation to sacred ground, to sanctify the secular, as when the approach to the other encounters “the general human yearning, overt or hidden: for we are all secondhand goods wanting to be appreciated as God’s first sunset” 45. There is still a place for a healer in our society. But the customary lines separating healer from spiritual guide and from political advocate cannot be sustained in the face of the onslaught from economic and cultural globalization and the scientistic reductionism of community life. The contemporary healer has to

40 Latner 2008:26
41 Zinker, In search of good form: 5–6
42 Doubrawa, Martin Buber, The Anarchist:9
43 Goodman, Nature Heals:45
44 Hycner, Friedman, Jacobs
45 Stephen Schoen, Gestalt Critique, p6
address these issues if there is to be integrity to his or her actions. Gestalt Therapy has within its theory and methodology the means to address these requirements.