

Carl Hodges

9th European Conference of Gestalt Therapy: Exploring Human Conflict

I was excited by the potential of “Exploring Human Conflict.” At the previous conference of the European Association for Gestalt Therapy (EAGT) in Prague in 2004, there was a sense of wanting to apply gestalt therapy perspectives to exploring, understanding, and assessing conflict, and being able to see choices. There seemed to be urgency regarding what we could identify, develop, and offer. There was talk of honing our skills, sharpening our instruments, and creating our “maps” at the next conference.

Gestalt therapy has much to offer in an exploration of conflict, such as in how we conceptualize and sharply distinguish “aggression.” In the invigorating chapter in *Gestalt Therapy*, “The Anti-Social and Aggression,” Paul Goodman writes:

The attitudes and acts called “aggressive” comprise a cluster of . . . *contact-functions* We shall try to show that at least annihilating, destroying, initiative, and anger are *essential* to growth in the organism/environment field. . . . Sado-masochism, conquest and domination, and suicide, we shall interpret as *neurotic* derivatives (Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 1951, p. 340, italics added).

We differentiate *destructuring* (based on appetite and integral to new gestalt formation/destruction) from *annihilation* (where the object is “isolated,” not felt, and attempted to be nullified to “complete the field”). But what is the relation of aggression to conflict? We see conflict as natural, but what is “conflict”? It is one of those scripted words with layers of meaning, expectations, fears, and behaviors. It holds deep metaphors: Is conflict seen as “war” (a battle, with enemies to kill or be killed by), or as “difference” (amenable to contact, discussion, commerce), or as a “dance” (fast or slow, prescribed or spontaneous, responsive or communicative — there may be many ways to do the conflict dance)?

Recent explorations in field dynamics, context, and the possibilities for community and “citizenship” have led to Richard Kitzler's declamation: “In a conflict, the antagonists are parts of a whole that is not yet seen” (R. Kitzler, personal communication). When the whole is seen, does this change the “shape” or “color” of the conflict?

It was against my personal background of questions, thoughts, and hopes that I attended the 9th European Conference of Gestalt Therapy in Athens, Greece, September 6–9, 2007. The conference was an embarrassment of riches, with more than 500 people from 25 countries and nearly 70 workshops and presentations. As is usual with me, I found deep satisfactions as well as creative frustrations.

The conference staff was efficient and gracious. Complaints were handled quickly. There was a feeling of warmth and care throughout the four days, which created a pervasive ambiance of humaneness. Athens itself even cooperated by being sunny, bright, and beautiful. The hotel was perfect: spacious and efficient, and its staff let conferees and presenters, like me from the United States and my co-presenter Toni Gilligan from the United Kingdom, linger for hours as we hammered out the details of our presentation.

The conference itself was well structured and organized. The opening keynote speech by Harm Siemens from the Netherlands was on “Courage: an essential ingredient for exploring human

conflict.” He spoke of conflict culturally, nationally and interpersonally, and said conflict touches us all. Trying to avoid conflict makes us too careful with “safe zones” limiting our own experiencing. With courage and support, conflict can lead to differentiation and growth. We need to bring gestalt therapy concepts to the more critical world issues and vulnerable population groups, “opening our boundaries” and bringing the world into our practice. He was interested in the search for areas of support and connection, in self and opponent, and in using dialogue arranged for several voices to find the “innate capacity for attunement.” There was a video at the opening ceremony — an achingly beautiful cinematic depiction of world conflicts. That ceremony ended as each member nation had a representative light a candle at the podium. At Sunday morning’s closing plenary, Ken Evans, president of EAGT, gave a closing address, “Living in the 21st Century: A gestalt therapist’s search for a new paradigm” — in which he described gestalt therapy as representing a shift from “I think, therefore I am,” to “You are, therefore I am.”

The conference contained many workshops to which I could not go. Those I attended were well thought out and thought provoking. The panel on “The influences of gestalt psychology and American pragmatism on the development of gestalt therapy” was particularly good, and the panelists (Richard Kitzler, Georges Wollents, Brigitte Holtzinger, and Dan Bloom; Nancy Amendt-Lyon, moderator) exceptionally well informed. The workshop given by Eva Titus on “Citizenship in an interrelated world: What kind of power, identity, and ethics can we embody?” was excellent and exciting. The stimulating workshop of Kathleen Hoell on “Power and violence from a Gestalt theoretical perspective” made use of the work of Hannah Arendt, and showed that the governments that are the most weak, the least legitimate, are the most likely to resort to violence.

I found the differentiation of “experiential” from “theoretical” workshops frustrating, and the time and person limit for “experiential” workshops an obstacle. Some workshops are always both, but this was not accounted for in the conference structure.

More importantly I could not get a sense of the whole — of collective discoveries, conclusions and resolutions, and next steps. There was no shared public space where people could speak as equals, rather than in audience–speaker mode. Process groups and the plenaries could have been used for an open exchange, to support shared learning and here-and-now issues and concerns. In any group this large, this much of a microcosm of the world outside, and together for this much time, there must have been issues of power, status, and *conflict* that would have arisen. These would be an *in vivo* resource, but I saw no explicit signs of it. But perhaps that would have been a different conference. Nevertheless, *very* important explorations were begun here, and should continue.

At the Saturday evening gala, a high point of the conference for me, there was the usual dance music, but also Greek professional folk dancers, whose energy drew us all into the dancing, which made of all of us equals — parts of this connecting, contacting, energetic, spontaneous whole, ferocious and elegant, feeding each others’ energy, bringing out new parts of each other, bright, lively, graceful, transforming. I have seldom had such a conference experience.

On the ferry to Santorini after the conference, I sat next to Theo, a student who had gone back home to Paros to vote in the national election, and was now returning to work in Crete. I asked him how many islands there were (“6,000”), and I asked him what it was like growing up on Paros.

“Where does the food come from: vegetables, milk, meat?”

“Vegetables from different Islands; most milk and meat from Crete.” He paused, and added, “The Islands cannot exist without each other.”

Indeed, I thought.

References

European Association for Gestalt Therapy (2007). 9th European Conference of Gestalt Therapy: Exploring Human Conflict. Conference website at <http://www.gestaltconferenceathens.gr>, with list of presentations at http://www.gestaltconferenceathens.gr/mnst/images/stories/PROGRAM_lista_sketi.pdf (retrieved December 8, 2007).

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