

## *Preface to the English Edition*

by Dan Bloom

The United States is at least a nation of immigrants, their children and grandchildren. This was true for the ethnically mixed neighborhood of New York City where I grew up. It was a common occurrence on special days for unfamiliar cars to drive up in front of one of my friend's houses and for people to gather, embrace, and greet one another with the sounds of what were to me foreign languages. More often than not, I, a stranger, would be caught up in the whirlwind of family love, embraced and kissed while Italian endearments were murmured in my ear.

These memories came to mind as I read this volume. Page after page, I found myself reading familiar material, family material as it were, written by my European relatives. This analogy is apt. Gestalt therapy was originated by European émigrés, who brought it with them to the United States, codeveloped with the American Paul Goodman, and, after some time budding further in America's cultural soil, was returned to Europe through, among others, the teachings of Laura Perls, Isadore From, and Richard Kitzler, three of my own principal teachers. The authors of the essays in this book, then, are in my gestalt therapy family, brothers, sisters, and cousins. They are taking the model of gestalt therapy of The New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy, founded in 1952 by the Perls's and others, and are applying and developing it, within their own cultural context, and by so doing, shining a clarifying light on it. As I read the essays, I see what elsewhere I have called "the foundational model" (Bloom, 2004) in all its glory, but I also see the richness of their European perspective, their direct application of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and postmodernism. The stream of gestalt therapy inevitably acquires the character of the land through which it flows.

But more than merely being a fine book of basic gestalt therapy, this volume is itself an important original contribution to our literature. It is a phenomenological and clinical discussion of a specific disorder we find in our psychotherapy practices. Gestalt therapy traditionally excels as an experiential practice; but the literature in gestalt therapy has been deficient in serious scientific research and clinical case material. This book from the Italian branch of our gestalt therapy family is a continuation of the foundational model and, moreover, fills a deficiency in gestalt therapy literature.

Despite the claim of some that gestalt therapy is a system built upon intuitive understanding rather than theory, gestalt therapy is in fact a psychotherapeutic modality with a unity of theory and praxis, an approach to clinical work that attends to the passage of experience itself as a function of the phenomenal field of the therapist and patient. In foundational gestalt therapy, there is no separate theory from practice, and no separate practice from theory. We hold, paraphrasing Immanuel Kant, that practice without theory is empty, and theory without practice is blind. Gestalt therapy is built upon the foundation of the arts and sciences, that is, all the achievements of our culture. Our work as gestalt therapists is that of our *intuitions informed by our knowledge*, integrated and integrating one with the other in a whole process as we continue to develop our art, our science (Bloom, 2004). Our art and science will develop further as we engage with one another in meaningful dialogues about our work, utilizing the concepts of our theory together with the experience of our clinical practices. This book is such a meaningful dialogue in this development.

Yet, to have a meaningful dialogue, we must use a common vocabulary. The original texts of gestalt therapy began to create the language for our method. First, in *Ego, Hunger, and Aggression* (F. Perls, 1942/1947), Frederick Perls (with Laura Perls) first outlined his radical departure from classical psychoanalysis which would later be called "gestalt therapy," and presented such notions as dental aggression, creative indifference, and mental metabolism. It was with the 1951 publication of *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* written by Frederick Perls, Ralph Hefferline, and Paul Goodman, that gestalt therapy was presented as a new modality with complex terms sufficient to describe human experience. The model of gestalt therapy presented in Perls et al. is the foundation upon which the authors of this

book practice their art.

The authors develop *contact*, *contact-boundary*, the *sequence of contact*, the critical role of *support for contact making*, the *interruptions to contact*, *self functions and structures*, *creative-adjustment*, and the *relationship of therapist to patient*, and show these concepts deployed in the successful treatment of panic disorders. These are the central ideas of Frederick and Laura Perls (L. Perls, 1992), Paul Goodman, and Isadore From, which were transplanted to Italian soil. The terms found in the glossary to this book itself are words first defined in Perls et al., and are continuing to be refined and developed in the worldwide practice of gestalt therapy. Look closely at this glossary: The definitions are not mere repetitions from Perls et al. or any subsequent source, but a careful synthesis of those sources with this book's authors own research. In this unity of theory and practice, the contributors bring new understanding to basic themes of gestalt therapy.

One of the threads connecting the various essays is how the nature of our concerns as psychotherapists changes over time. What were significant clinical concerns at the time of gestalt therapy's emergence in the 1950s were no longer crucial in the 1970s, and similarly, the concerns of society in the 1990s could no longer be central in this new century. Consequently, how therapists respond to these concerns must likewise change. This is the hermeneutics of gestalt therapy, our understanding that meaning is inevitably changing and always co-created by therapist and patient as partners in the ongoing creative-adjusting in our clinical work. The authors ask us, then, to consider panic disorder to be the disorder of our time.

The temporal and cultural contingency of meaning is at the heart of gestalt therapy. The narratives and metanarratives which inform our work have long been our concern. The authors of this publication take this from gestalt therapy and link it explicitly to postmodern ideas. Drawing on sociology, psychology, and philosophy, the authors show the relevance of gestalt therapy to other contemporary approaches that consider panic disorders from a broad cultural perspective. By doing so, they firmly establish gestalt therapy as a continually developing psychotherapy, not as an artifact of any time or fashion. Moreover, they do this while using the concepts of the foundational model itself, clearly and succinctly applied to the clinical situations of their research. It is gratifying to read how clearly the phenomenon of panic can be understood when viewed through the lens of gestalt therapy.

Importantly, this volume is not restricted to the clinician's perspective. In keeping with gestalt therapy's attention to experience as emergent of the social field, and that psychotherapy itself as a phenomenon of the contact-boundary *par excellence*, this work includes a chapter written from the perspective of an actual patient. This is both a dramatic entry into the world of someone suffering from panic disorder and a direct example of the phenomenological research method of the authors.

It has been a privilege for me to write an introduction to this book. I expect it will produce in you the same desire for the translation into English of more writings from this community of Italian foundational gestalt therapists as it does in me, a member of their English-speaking family.

## References

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