The Power of Gestalt Therapy in Accessing the Transpersonal:
Working with Physical Difference and Disability
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Deborah Bowman, Ph.D.
Tricia A. Leakey, M.A.

Corresponding Author: Deborah Bowman, Ph.D., Chair, Transpersonal Counseling
Psychology Department, 2130 Arapahoe Avenue, Naropa University, Boulder, Colorado,
80302, USA. Phone: (303) 440-0808; email: bowman@naropa.edu.

Abstract

Gestalt therapy is a very powerful tool in accessing transpersonal domains. Three
gestalt experiments are described that took place within a year-long class at Naropa
University. For each of these sessions, Deborah was the teacher/facilitator and Trish was the
student/client. These Gestalt experiments are presented as demonstrations of (1) Gestalt
theory in action, (2) the applicability of Gestalt therapy with special populations, and (3) ways
in which Gestalt practice can lead to spiritual unfolding. We demonstrate how gestalt is
utilized as a transformative approach in working through issues of physical difference,
including hearing impairment, that are central to the person and sensory in nature.

Deborah Bowman, Ph.D., is a licensed clinical psychologist in private practice, and a certified
Gestalt therapist and Gestalt trainer with the Boulder Psychotherapy Institute. She is founder
and chair of the Transpersonal Counseling Psychology program at Naropa University, where
she is an Associate Professor. She also developed the Wilderness Therapy program at Naropa
University.

Trish Leakey, M.A., graduated from Naropa University’s Transpersonal Counseling
Psychology program and is currently in law school planning to combine law and psychology
in a career of working with others. She has published several articles related to cancer
prevention and intervention, contributed a book chapter on Deaf history, and presented on
Deaf history and the needs of Deaf students in higher education.
We would like to share powerful and transformative experiences from our year-long Gestalt Awareness class at the Naropa University. We will describe what happened from the inside of three classes where, as teacher, Deborah facilitated therapeutic learning experiments and exercises. Trish, as student, volunteered to be the “client” for two interventions that Deborah demonstrated, by facilitating experiments in class “as therapist” with Trish, and in a third intervention where Deborah coached another student facilitating an experiment “as therapist” with Trish. In this paper, we have chosen a method where each of us reports on our observations and insights to give the reader different viewpoints of the experience. We have also included perspectives from the other students in the class that demonstrate that something very personally rich and deeply transpersonal occurred in our classroom with each gestalt session.

Deborah:

Remarkable change and transpersonal occurrences are not uncommon in Gestalt therapy groups or classes. In fact, they happen on a regular basis and need to be documented more often. As chair of the Transpersonal Counseling Psychology (TCP) department and as a gestalt trainer for the last sixteen years, I have witnessed many powerful instances of the transformational quality of Gestalt practice with students and faculty in many classroom settings here and elsewhere. The aim of this paper is to document the tangible benefits of the Gestalt approach to psychotherapy in training students and, ultimately, in working with clients.

We also feel it is crucial to convey how a Gestalt approach can facilitate movement into transpersonal and non-egoic domains of experience. Transpersonal psychology draws extensively from Eastern and Western world wisdom traditions in understanding the human experience of spirituality. In the broadest sense, a definition of transpersonal psychology implies the study of human phenomena beyond yet inclusive of the personal. The ultimate territory of the transpersonal is without boundaries. Within this context, the ego is viewed as a constructed identification or experience of separateness from others and the world. This does not negate the important set of skills of self-knowing, associated with ego development as defined in the psychodynamic literature, as necessary to negotiate in the world. Transpersonal psychology aims to value psychological boundaries, as a relative understanding of human experience, within an ultimate view that is without definition or parameters (Wilber, 1998).

While transpersonal psychology has sought to define itself in relation to the psychodynamic conceptualization of ego, Perls definition of the term describes a more fluid process of ego activated at the here-and-now contact boundary (PG&H, 1951). His notion of the contact boundary creates a less solidified conception of ego and is closer to the ultimate transpersonal state of no-self. Ego, in the Gestalt sense, rises and falls in relation to contact with the environment. In withdrawal from contact, the sense of self dissolves into a confluent relation that is designated as either healthy, resting or in a wakeful state of union, or
unhealthy, in a position of escape evidenced in disturbances at the ego boundary denoting unfinished business from the past alive in the present.

Wilber’s widely accepted transpersonal map of three basic stages of human development divides into prepersonal, personal and transpersonal experience (Wilber, 1986). Gestalt traverses similar terrain in its theory of growth through contact. Out of a prepersonal state of confluence, the child moves toward adulthood through growing awareness in contactful relationship with the world. Personal development and growth occurs as the contact boundary expands assimilating what is healthy for the development of the responsible and self-supporting person. The third stage of transpersonal development occurs when this ever expanding boundary leads to a sense of no-borders or actuality of what is. Here, a sense of contact and boundlessness can paradoxically coexist in awareness. These three stages can be experienced as temporary states or longer term traits of maturation.

While gestalt lends itself to a breadth of methodology, the foundation is built on the attitudinal orientation of actuality, awareness and responsibility (Naranjo, 1993). Demonstrated in this paper through gestalt methods of dramatic enactment and facilitated dialogue, these ways of being become doorways to experiences found in the transpersonal sphere of the I-Thou relationship in Martin Buber’s existential and religious schema (Buber, 1970). The I-Thou experience necessitates consciousness of the actuality of self and other within a field of awareness that is broader than individual experience. True responsiveness, or responsibility, occurs spontaneously within the context of this meaningful new encounter with the other.

Eastern religion, including Buddhism and Taoism, was a primary influence in the development of the Gestalt approach to psychotherapy (Smith, 1976). These influences form the root of the transpersonal orientation of gestalt. Similar to existentialism, Buddhism and Taoism understand the present moment to be the entirety of experience and value experience over concept. Buddhist philosophy broadens the concept of nothingness as the basis of reality by providing awareness practices, such as meditation, to enable individuals to contact the experience of emptiness. Like meditation, Gestalt practice embraces awareness enhancing exercises aimed toward awakening and enlivening experience. The difference is that the Gestalt approach is relational and expressive, rather than introspective and aimed at the practice of enhancing the meditator’s attention. Emptiness is a radical version of self-support, non-attachment necessary for self-surrender, and acceptance of the moment an opportunity to experience the unconditioned or organismic self (Naranjo, 1993).

Perls description of the fertile void parallels a concept central to Taoist philosophy expressed in this verse of the Tao te Ching.

The Tao is like a well:
used but never used up.
It is like the eternal void:
filled with infinite possibilities.

(Mitchell, 1988)

This verse describes the Tao as a dynamic void that pours out and receives all beings (Chen, 1988). Perls describes the fertile void as “neither objective nor subjective. Nor is it introspection. It simply is. It is awareness without speculation about the things of which one is
aware.” (Perls, 1978). The initial experience of this layer can feel schizophrenic. We back away from this bottomless pit in fear of annihilation and death. We imagine a sterile, lifeless void. Yet, when we surrender to this nothingness, experience emerges free of all conditioning that the void actually implies. We then experience ourselves as process that is nothing but real and alive (Perls, 1969).

We share another motivation to write about our experience together. We want to talk about the power of Gestalt in working with physical differences that are core to the person and sensory in nature. Trish is partly deaf and relies on hearing aids in order to hear speech. I lost an eye over twenty-five years ago and shed my prosthesis after years of physical discomfort and unsuccessful surgery. Our experience of being physically different from the norm vividly affects us on many levels of our lives; we both have found the core philosophy and some of the particular methodology of Gestalt practice to be extremely helpful in working through issues of physical difference and disability. In sharing these dimensions of gestalt we offer a model of its usefulness in working with special populations.

As humans we understand suffering when we get inside it -- through touching pain in ourselves and in others. The Gestalt approach coaxes us into a significant understanding of suffering by inviting us to express it outwardly in a safe environment with our whole-hearted speech and embodied process (Kepner, 1987). This is where an embodied, expressive method has an edge over traditional forms of therapy because it prompts clients to contact fully their inner state and then vividly enact this internal experience by bringing forth their voices and movements more authentically, clearly, and openly. Because Gestalt does not exclusively rely on speech or “talk therapy,” but utilizes visual and kinesthetic channels extensively, it is a powerful tool in working with special populations. In her case, Trish was able to more authentically access her experience by being encouraged to engage visual and kinesthetic, as opposed to strictly auditory, channels. Through these methods, the actuality of her life became more vibrant and accessible to herself and the other participants in the classroom.

Gestalt grounds the transpersonal by bringing it into the here and now (Resnick, 1975). Through focusing on an individual’s moment-by-moment experiencing, she or he is invited to access levels of awareness of out the range of usual experience. The principle of contact in Gestalt, also primary to the field, becomes another door to the transpersonal when we understand it in terms of touching the experience of another. Perls states, “When there is good contact—e.g., a clear bright figure freely energized from an empty background, there is no particular problem concerning the relations of “mind” and “body” or “self” and “external world” (Perls, 1969). We can move beyond the personal and individual experience to awareness of and connection with all that is. This experience of the universal and ungraspable reality is documented in the transpersonal literature as profoundly healing (Vaughn, 1986). The unitive experience or sense of “one-ness” is often shared between clients and therapists or an entire group and becomes an unforgettable moment. The awareness of a unitive field of consciousness, an important area of study within transpersonal psychology, is widely recognized across religious and spiritual traditions throughout the world.

Gestalt group work offers great healing potential for every member. Individuals are witnessed in an environment that is supportive and encouraging of deep and full self-expression. In turn, members of the group benefit by witnessing and touching suffering and
the relief of suffering in themselves and others. Sharing in this universal experience offers us a collective sense of a sacred event, an event that penetrates us at all levels, deepens and opens us to greater awareness, and symbolizes a spiritual landmark in our life. When we intimately connect to another person through a mutual life-changing event, a field of unity is experienced between us. In a gestalt group this spiritual occurrence is tangible and to be relished. This may occur when we allow spaciousness around the event and the opportunity for members to experience, share and verbalize positive feelings or a sense of the sacred.

Trish’s three sessions over the course of the year were powerfully evocative. In witnessing her journey, others in the class experienced their own connection with the sacred by touching the depth of Trish’s pain with their eyes, ears, body sensations and inner feelings of the heart. The unobstructed and direct experience of the other is considered to be at the heart of the I-Thou relationship in Martin Buber’s description of the spiritual encounter. In Buddhist studies this meeting is described as an awakening experience stripped of egoic or neurotic features. Consciousness, cleansed of projection and obscuration, is a state of awareness, actuality and interpenetration with the other. Thich Nat Han uses the term inter-being to describe similar phenomena from the Buddhist perspective.

Trish:
As part of the Master of Arts in the TCP training program, I was required to complete two consecutive semesters of Gestalt Awareness with Deborah. In this class, students experience individual Gestalt experiments within a group context. In the first semester, the instructor serves as a facilitator for a student’s experiment as a “client” while the rest of the class sits in a circle as witnesses. After a Gestalt session, observing students and the instructor give personal feedback of their experience to the group and the individual who played the “client.” Everyone is encouraged to focus on reporting his or her own bodily sensations and personal associations, including emotional and mental phenomena. The group then takes a break before discussing as a class what they learned from their observations about the process of the therapeutic intervention. In the second semester, students began leading Gestalt experiments with the coaching of the instructor.

The Gestalt Awareness class that we discuss in this paper was comprised of eleven students that met during the Fall and Spring Semesters of the second year of a three year Master’s program. The course presents a hands-on way of learning and working with Gestalt techniques. It is not therapy but a training situation where therapeutic processes are demonstrated. However, in the experience of participating in the class, therapeutic processes, thoughts, emotions, awareness, risks, and positive outcomes may and do occur. This process requires mature students and a seasoned therapist to hold the paradox of demonstrating therapeutic work. It also involves participants being in a class setting where it is sometimes necessary to stop the action to explain and discuss what is happening and why.

Students enrolled in this course were assigned to write weekly papers about their phenomenological observations that included recording their personal and inner experiences. Their assignment was to integrate their reflections on internal states and their observations of others into their learning of the Gestalt Therapy approach. They wrote about witnessing profound moments of contact and healing in the Gestalt encounter that we will be describing
here. Excerpts from some of their writings are presented in this paper as additional viewpoints.

Throughout the year, I engaged in three major experiments that are described in this article. The first session involved telling the class about my drawing of my family of origin. Earlier in the course Deborah had asked students to draw a picture of their families from childhood. In the drawing, family members could be depicted realistically or abstractly, and students were asked to draw with their non-dominant hand. To more extensively explore the feelings that were identified in the family drawing, we could choose to enact our images in a “family sculpture”. A family sculpture is a technique where members of the group are assigned by one person to play the family member roles. This person is encouraged to assign the roles of particular family members to people who remind her or him of those family members. The actors are given just a few salient details about their parts. As they enact their parts, they often find themselves inhabited and moved by ever deeper nuances of their roles. The whole group, including the person who assigned the roles, witnesses the interactions of the family members. This process often yields a rich discussion and great insight for everyone in the group about this person’s family dynamics.

I chose to do a family sculpture of my drawing and cast class members into the various roles of my family, which included my mother, father, two sisters, the family dog, and me. Due to my unique experience as a Deaf person in a family where all the members were Deaf, I asked the role-players to communicate by moving their hands in order to approximate the sign language environment in which I grew up (note: I use an uppercase D to denote a cultural identification, not simply an audiological state [Padden & Humphries, 1988; Lane, 1984]). Thus, the classmate assigned the role of my mother chased the person who played myself around the room while constantly moving her hands in front of her face as though she were signing.

Deborah:

The students and I learned much and empathically connected with Trish’s experience in looking at her drawing and watching the dramatic enactment of her family dynamics as a child. The drawing with the non-dominant hand helps elicit information that would otherwise be out of conscious awareness. It provides an opportunity for the participant to drop into a more childlike experience and express emotions and impressions without verbal language (Horowitz, 1983). Through Trish’s artwork, group members had the opportunity to see and feel Trish’s experience in the nonverbal language of artistic process (Rhyne, 1984). Trish’s drawing appeared to her and other participants to signify feelings of chaos and a lack of boundaries in her family setting. The dramatic enactment seemed to confirm these observations as we watched the chase scene, other family interactions, and a sibling trying to defend against intrusion by isolating herself.

In setting up the family sculpture, Trish explained how her totally-deaf mother had only learned to sign at 21 years of age, shortly before Trish’s birth. As we witnessed the drama of the chase, we could feel and see the frightful desperation of both mother and daughter. The mother appeared desperate to finally be heard and the daughter desperate to escape a perpetual invasion of verbiage literally thrown in her face. In all the family drama
surrounding this enactment we sensed deeply that the one refuge Trish could reliably seek comfort in was the family pet dog, Pokey. In the dramatic enactment the assigned person who played Trish sought out the person who played Pokey many times as a source of affection and refuge. This genuinely touched many of us in the class and could be felt on a visceral level by all of us. Part of the power of this experience was in the identification many of us have had with cherished family pets, as well as our empathy with a small dependent being that is completely reliant on the nurturance of others for survival. The unconditional love and companionship of a childhood family pet is well-recognized by many in our culture.

This encounter also illustrated the power of the family sculpture process and dramatic enactment (Satir, 1983). For a profoundly non-verbal, visually-oriented client such as Trish, the appeal of being able to work with her experiences outside the realm of speech is quite clear. Throughout the course of the year, Trish most often chose the kinesthetic and visual tools of dramatic enactment in the Gestalt experiments she chose. Therapeutic interventions may be greatly enhanced for people with varying primary sensory learning-styles when matching or multiple sensory channels are accessed in the work. Many clients and students with visual or kinesthetic learning styles are often not matched by therapists and teachers utilizing auditory methods that are the prevailing teaching and communication methods of the dominant culture (Markova, 1992).

Trish:

The second experiment focused on my experience as a Deaf person in a Hearing world. This session was prompted by my arriving at the class’s weekend intensive only to discover that the amplification equipment crucial to my hearing and my ability to participate in class had not arrived. As a hard-of-hearing student from an entirely Deaf family, my first language is American Sign Language. I am fluent in English and completed six years of speech therapy as a child to foster my speaking and lip-reading skills. I identify with deafness not simply in terms of having a physical disability but as a physical difference that is characteristic of the members of my culture (Lane 1992). To me, Deafness is a cultural identity, one that encompasses a uniquely shared language (American Sign Language), history, education, arts, social norms, and other countless daily life experiences (Padden & Humphries, 1988; Lane, 1984; Lane, Hoffmeister, Bahan 1996; Van Cleve & Crouch, 1989). The term “Hearing world” is Deaf people’s way of identifying the dominant mainstream culture, one that communicates verbally and auditorily, with all the values, preferences, and advantages that arise from that orientation (Padden & Humphries, 1988; Lane, 1984; Lane, 1992).

With my hearing aids off, I do not hear most sounds, including speech. With them on, I can hear a great deal of speech. My level of speech and my ability to hear is quite unusual among Deaf people, and my degree of penetration into the Hearing world is rare. Having been almost entirely educated in public schools and having spent much of my life in strictly Hearing settings, I am also strongly culturally “Hearing”. However, I can never fully participate in the Hearing world due to my degree of deafness. Paradoxically, many Deaf people consider me to be “too Hearing” due to my degree of hearing capability, speech, acculturation, and interest in moving in Hearing circles. I also have the same difficulty in the Hearing world because many hearing people deny my Deafness.
I wear two hearing aids and participate in all-hearing classes through the use of a microphone and amplification system. This system requires that all of my classmates use a hand-held microphone when speaking. I rely heavily on lip-reading in following verbal communications. Others must gesture before speaking so that I know where to orient myself in lip-reading. My presence in the class creates an undeniable amount of extra work for my fellow students and requires a great deal of concentration and effort on my part.

When the equipment finally did arrive at our weekend intensive, it was missing cables and power cords and was unusable for the class session. The effort of trying to get the system to work resulted in a significant delay in the start of class and I was without the amplification that I needed for the first evening of the weekend. I struggled through class that evening and felt a cascade of emotion as I watched my classmates participate in highly emotional and powerful group workings that my deafness and the lack of proper equipment precluded me from joining.

My tumult of feelings stayed with me throughout the rest of that night and into the next morning. Accordingly, I brought a complicated set of emotions that included anger, grief, shame, vulnerability, and fear to the start of the next day of class. By this time the necessary amplification equipment had finally arrived. At the start of my session, among other things, I brought in a charge of anger around technology and equipment, including the amplification system and my hearing aids. I quickly volunteered to be a “client” in a demonstration of a gestalt experiment with Deborah.

As I began working, I cycled through a lengthy process of charge-building and impasses (Polster & Polster, 1973). In Gestalt theory, a process of charge-building can be diminished when one meets an impasse. This is a natural cycle. In my case, I alternated between feeling my powerful emotions of anger, grief, and powerlessness, and shifting into my head, where I focused on providing dry and technical explanations of my deafness to educate my audience (necessary, of course, before I could drop into my “real” self!). In doing so, I shuttled between feeling the full force of my emotions (charge-building) and retreating from them. I experienced the blockages of energy in my body as a polarity between the charge and the impasse. The charge registered as hot sensations in my head and the impasse in my throat was a sensation of feeling constricted, as though I had to choke out my words.

Although I was frustrated, I resisted Deborah’s encouragement for me to contact my bodily sensations, a process that would have helped me directly experience my anger. Deborah shifted the focus of my attention when she asked me to communicate in American Sign Language. This was an effective first step in getting me out of my head and more into my body. After I first signed the word angry, she asked me to sign the word again and again, building a charge and intensity of feeling. She encouraged me to exaggerate the movements of my body as I signed. Awareness within me occurred when I finally let go and refused to continue engaging in a “Hearing” way by removing my hearing aids. I identified wearing the hearing aids as being foreign and artificial to my “true” self; I felt more comfortable, natural, and whole without having to use modifications and adaptations in order to meet the Hearing world. This experience of contact gave me a genuine sense of myself free from concepts, artificial accoutrements, or technical devices.
Even though I had just spent most of my session explaining how I could not hear without my hearing aids, Deborah continued speaking to me in spite of the fact that I had removed my hearing aids! My anger exploded. Her mistake perfectly crystallized the ignorance that I constantly face and how isolated and alone I feel in the Hearing world. After I stated this to Deborah, she skillfully guided me to a safe expression of my anger at her and the Hearing world by handing me a tennis racquet and providing a pillow for me to pound. It was then that I fully expressed my rage and grief and moved from the realm of talking about my experience to fully and directly experiencing it in the here and now.

Deborah:

In my ignorance I did keep talking when Trish cast off her hearing aids. I tried to move my face in view of her eyes thinking that maybe she could lip-read if I physically exaggerated the articulation of the words with my mouth. I was wrong and caught the power of Trish’s rage. She was making complete and deep contact with her feelings and I was the target! My experience with the gestalt process helped me to get quickly out of the way and throw a pillow representing myself and the Hearing world in front of Trish. She grabbed the tennis racquet and furiously beat the pillow and screamed out her anger while tears streamed down her face. In this way she deepened the expression of feelings to catharsis where she fully discharged her anger and grief.

In looking back at the session I imagine that I also stimulated an old projection of mother in the way I got in Trish’s face with my relentless and intrusive talking. Because I was able to see and admit my mistake to Trish and encourage her full expression of feelings, I also imagine that I was able to provide a new experience of “mother” as listening with understanding and not always talking. In our group sharing after the session, the students termed my action as an “eloquent mistake”, and I believe my willingness to admit faults deepened their trust in my facilitation and in other Gestalt experiments throughout the weekend intensive.

Trish:

In feeling and expressing my enormous fury, I was in full relationship with my anger. I felt much relief in having finally suspended my long-held patterns of choking off and self-censoring my anger and grief. After some time I stopped and became aware that many others in the circle were crying and sharing my sadness. At this time Deborah gestured an offer to be held in her arms. I sobbed in her embrace as my anger was spent and I contacted deep grief. I then had moments of silence and an experience of withdrawal and an internal fertile void. In this space, the boundaries around my sense of self felt as though they had partly dissolved, in ways that felt spacious and pleasurable. I felt freed of my anger and grief and aware of a fuller sense of myself that encompassed, yet was much larger than, those emotions. I experienced this not as belittling of the frustrations of being Deaf in a Hearing world, but as acknowledgement that the full sum of my inner being transcended my limitations. I discovered that there are many possibilities in how I choose to relate to this aspect of my physical reality.
Several moments later, Deborah gestured to me to address the group and make statements about where I would go from here. In this way, she was helping me to transition from the fertile void’s sense of endless possibility to the ground of the real world and the concrete changes I could make (Lifschitz, 1992). I committed to becoming more active in raising the awareness of Hearing people about my internal and emotional experiences of being Deaf. I also committed to not pretending to hear with Hearing people when I really don’t. After some more time of my resting in a feeling of the group’s embrace, Deborah gestured for me to return to my seat and join the other group members again.

In the closure of our session I had a new experience in my interactions with others. Deborah and the class were sensitive to staying within a non-verbal space and connected with me without speech. As I made eye contact with every witness in the group, my classmates communicated with me in heartfelt and even playful non-verbal ways. Later, I wrote in my journal that “you joined me in my world rather than demanding that I again meet you in yours” and that “Being able to connect with the rest of the class in my fully Deaf state felt unspeakably fulfilling.” After a break, I received verbal feedback from everyone in the group, where the class shared their experience and feelings while they were observing my session. Here, classmates all expressed a deep sense of connection to and understanding of my pain as well as an enhanced appreciation of our shared humanity.

Deborah:

The movement from being stuck, to anger, to grief, to wondrous silence, to committing to new action, and then to playful sharing occurred in under an hour. The effects for all of us felt indelible. In the feedback following a Gestalt experiment, I request that students in the circle share from their own personal experience and present-tense feelings. Students shared deeply from where they connected to Trish’s work and later responded in their journals with insightful comments. One student stated in his journal, “It is amazing to me how much we, the witnesses, get to work when we are just watching. I moved through some of my own anger and sad issues by watching the other active participants.” Another student wrote, “In the moments of silence after her peak catharsis, I imagine Trish may have experienced a fertile void, the zone alive with expansiveness, insight and possibilities for rearranging consciousness.” Her courage to go deeply into the gestalt process inspired a healing that was named by group members as “sacred” for all of us in the circle that day. Explicit naming of a transpersonal experience by an individual may assist others in contacting this boundless state.

When Trish had spent her anger and was still without her hearing aids, I gestured an offer to give her a hug as a means of making genuine empathic contact. She accepted and then cried in my arms until she exhausted her grief. While holding a client or student is not a norm in therapy or the classroom, the group setting makes this interaction possible in unusual circumstances such as this one. An alternative with hearing people might have been to ask if they would like to make physical contact or be held by a peer member of the group. This provides an opportunity for individuals to learn appropriate contact commensurate to the depth of expressed emotion. In the moment I was aware that Trish had good boundaries and a healthy ability to express her true feelings and clear choices, as demonstrated earlier in our exchange. Students often ask me if it is appropriate for a therapist to express empathy with
physical contact. Although there are many places in the United States where this is not allowed, I do believe that used with a high level of discretion, this intervention can have enormous benefit. A group setting often makes this possible by providing a legal witness for the therapist. In a group, members can also be encouraged to experiment with healthy non-intrusive physical contact and receive feedback from one another.

After her session I also expressed the depth of connection that I felt with Trish and spoke to her of my own experience with the loss of my eye. I shared how I experienced the technology of a prosthesis getting in my way of real awareness with others and being an incredible bother. I also resonated with the theme of having to “fake” connection by pretending to have two eyes. I shared how I went through a long period of acting like everything was all right after my accident when I was actually sitting on enormous feelings of disconnection after the removal of my eye over twenty-five years ago. I shared how my personal Gestalt work several years after my accident helped me to contact my grief, work through anger and shame, and opened me to healing.

In looking back at Trish’s appreciation of her natural state without hearing aids I am profoundly struck by the beauty of her silent world and my cultural bias that the Hearing world is preferable in all its dimensions. Silence is a valued attribute in spiritual communities and is a hallmark of many practices that help individuals access transpersonal domains (Walsh, 1999). Here is an example of an advantage of the Deaf world that Trish describes earlier. When she courageously removed her hearing aids, she allowed those of us who were present to experience this aspect of her reality. In doing so, she reclaims full access to the wonder of her natural being without the shame of comparison with those in the Hearing world.

Trish and Deborah:

In looking over the entire session, Trish moved through phony, phobic, implosive, and explosive layers of neurotic experience to a greater state of authenticity (Perls, 1973). In the beginning she mentioned feeling self-conscious and was concerned how others perceived her. Moving through this phony layer marked by cliché and role-playing, she met the phobic layer of avoidance evident in several experiences of meeting an impasse. She imploded in a deadlock between opposing forces within herself of constriction and expression. In meeting this implosive layer fully, Trish finally exploded in anger, grief, and eventual joy in a fresh awareness of contact.

We also observed that a cycle of a Gestalt experiment was illustrated in her work (Polster & Polster 1973). Trish began her Saturday morning session articulating a desire to work and we began with the awareness phase. With Deborah’s prompting, she identified feeling self-conscious, angry and sad. She voiced having an awareness of tightness in her chest and that some class members seemed to her to be annoyed or inconvenienced by the hassle with the audio equipment. Her awareness built to identifying a charge of anger with the Hearing world, the Deaf world, and the technological equipment.

Deborah made a contract to work with Trish by obtaining an agreement to do a Gestalt session with her feelings of anger. Deborah proposed to set up an experiment with Trish around the charge of anger by suggesting that Trish directly address the Hearing world.
Although this appeared to have the highest charge, Trish cycled through several impasses in attempting to express her feelings by talking to a pillow identified as the Hearing world. Deborah realized that because Trish was surrounded by Hearing people, this may have been too overwhelming a task. Deborah then suggested Trish address a slightly less charged subject by dialoguing with her hearing aids and audio equipment. This switch to a less charged yet important and very personal “figure” in the drama gave Trish the freedom to embody her feelings directly. Trish was able to reach the stage of contact where she negotiated within herself to remove the barrier to experiencing the fullness of her being.

Contact and deepening was achieved when Deborah suggested she communicate in American Sign Language. Individuals are often able to express themselves more spontaneously with their first and native language. Not only was Trish freer to express herself in her native language, she also was able to tap into pre-verbal memories. Our earliest communication as children is often non-verbal and gestural. Thus clients often benefit by using gestural and non-verbal communication because it helps them contact early experiences. This effect with Trish was heightened, given her lifelong experience as a Deaf person using sign language.

Many students commented in their assigned journals on their experience of participating in Trish’s session. One common theme was students’ new sense of responsibility and understanding of how to work with physical difference as well as the suffering of having a disability. One man stated, “I never took the time to put myself in her shoes. I never made any exceptions, outside of using the microphone, so that I could ensure that she was included in our group. I truly was educated and edified by witnessing her process. I was granted a glorious firsthand experience of how to do therapy with someone who is different than me. What a privilege. I am so much more aware of how I need to be open to all persons regardless of MY differences from them!” Trish’s working transcended purely individual pain and created connection and responsiveness across the members of the group. As another student wrote, “My own tears began rolling as I felt Trish’s sadness, and I felt part of something larger as I observed the mass catharsis in the group.”

Trish:

In our required sum-up and journal of the class I wrote, “After this weekend, I have felt like there is room for me to approach my experience of deafness differently. I feel a strong sense of the fertile void. Things feel fresh and open. I am not sure where things are going but no longer feel so stuck and stagnant. Greater possibilities for expression and be-ing feel available to me.” Today, more than five years after that unforgettable day, I continue to feel a sense of peace and possibility around the paradoxical frustrations and benefits of being Deaf that I attribute to the breakthrough during that class.

Deborah:

All movement toward wholeness encompasses both loss and creation, letting go and entering into the unknown territory of a new relational meeting with others and the world. The potentiality of this sacred space has been described in the gestalt literature as a fertile void, where nothing actually exists, yet all things are possible (Van Dusen, 1959). The events
marking great loss, positive transformation and the natural demarcations of human development have traditionally been held in the container of religious ceremony and shared spiritual activities.

The profound experience of the Gestalt group offers this same opportunity and is enhanced when sacred experience can be named and appreciated as such. Trish names this experience in her journal as a fertile void, a gestalt concept derived from Eastern philosophy where emptiness or nothingness (no-thingness) is valued as a supreme state of readiness for whatever may come. She empties herself of content from the past, permits a state of not knowing regarding the future, and rests in the peace of the present moment uncontaminated by unfinished business or expectations. The fertile void seems to underlie both the implosive and explosive layers, permitting the full experience of both.

Techniques borrowed from psychodrama and the theater are powerful tools to incorporate into Gestalt (Marcus, 1979). These include exaggeration, repetition, extreme focus on detail, and often lively and loud enactment of body gestures. In contrast, they can also focus on extremely subtle emotions and expressions. Viewers are often irresistibly brought into the power and actuality of another person’s interior or external experience. For the actors, kinesthetic embodiment of feelings, thoughts, dream images, family dynamics, and interpersonal dialogue brings issues to life and puts them on the table in a way that is uniquely workable. Making everything external and concrete allows them to get their hands on the situation and create the situation anew. In the process, the individual experiences a deeply satisfying sense of mastery of her reality and ability to respond in the moment with her whole self.

Trish’s third session the following semester was equally profound and touched deeply on the transpersonal in content as well as in a felt sense of the process. She shared a dream and chose to work with it as a dramatic enactment, requesting other group members to play different parts. Another student was practicing facilitating the experiment that day, and I was coaching her in the role of the therapist. In Trish’s dramatization, one part of the dream was particularly evocative, and Trish requested that it be played several times so that she could “get” the impact of witnessing the event on a gut level. In this portion of the dream she is squirting acid into the eyes of a black Labrador Retriever in an attempt to kill it. She chose a woman with big brown eyes to play the part of the Black Lab. Another student was assigned the role of Trish in the dream, and in her enactment this woman pretended to use an eyedropper to squirt acid into the Labrador’s eyes.

In the enactment the Black Lab just sat looking up with big sad eyes as the person playing Trish repeatedly squirited the acid. Trish and every member of the group felt the intense pain evoked in the dramatic enactment. Many commented on the connection they imagined this dream might have with her earlier childhood experience with Pokey. The woman who was playing Trish later stated how difficult it was for her to repeatedly play this role. The woman playing the Black Lab expressed how she felt a desperate yearning to connect and communicate with Trish in her role as the dog.
Trish:

I brought this disturbing dream to the class because it was so vivid, and I imagined work with it would be fruitful to my growth. In telling the tale, it became clear that the charge for me centered on the Black Labrador and the black spiders that he heaved and coughed up after being sprayed with the acidic liquid. The classmate who was facilitating my working was coached by Deborah to follow this emotional charge. With this encouragement, she suggested that I focus on witnessing the interactions with the Labrador and spiders. As I watched my classmate repeatedly squirt the liquid into the dogs’ eyes, my feelings and charge deepened considerably. When the student facilitator noticed this, I was encouraged by her to dialogue with the Black Lab on a pillow. I switched back and forth between being “Trish” in the dream and the dog.

In the process of dialoguing, I unfolded into a deeply spiritual place. To my surprise, embodying the Black Lab led to a remarkable felt sense of boundless love, great compassion, and tremendous interconnection with others. The Black Lab voiced to me and the entire group the importance of knowing our interconnectedness. The Black Lab told me that I am always held in a loving and nurturing space, but that I do not always know it. The Lab told me it sent emissaries to remind me, and these are the black spiders. Whenever I see a spider in my daily life, it is a reminder from the Black Lab of love and compassion, both for myself individually and for all beings. During the closure phase of my working, I realized how the experience was powerfully moving for everyone in the class as well as myself.

Whenever I now remember the Black Lab, I access the feeling level of boundless love, great compassion, connection and not being alone. This immediate access is a tremendous psychological and spiritual resource: simply the thought of the Black Lab brings back these feelings. My childhood experience with Pokey was the template for my everyday experience of unconditional love in the world. He is a symbol of the concrete and mundane level of love and compassion. The Black Lab for me is a transpersonal, absolute, and archetypal symbol of the loving and compassionate mother of us all. On the day of my working, everyone in class expressed accessing this archetypal level of connection. When I named the Black Lab as a Bodhisattva, everyone got it and understood how touching into this energy helps us all to access the Bodhisattva and the divine within ourselves.

Deborah:

Archetypal images can put us in touch with transpersonal symbols that describe spiritual and religious experience (Jung, 1959). The Bodhisattva is a Buddhist term for enlightened beings who vow to return to earth to help others until all beings are enlightened and free of suffering (Chodron, 1997). As Trish touched into this Bodhisattva energy, she “got” how she was blinding herself to pain in her own life. In the dramatic enactment she was now choosing to see and be with this pain as she witnessed the dream in a conscious state. She also became aware on an inner level of how she was denying herself the unconditional love and acceptance that Pokey provided when she was young. Pokey’s unconditional acceptance was a positive introject that Trish embodied in the working and as an outcome now has more direct access to this aspect of herself. Trish spontaneously named the Black Labrador a Bodhisattva in the
way he absorbed her pain, and she was able at that moment to grow in compassion for herself through this deeply felt insight.

Her spontaneous connection of the Black Lab with the universal Mother (Neuman, 1955) reiterates the theme of her work separating from the difficult aspects of the introjected personal mother. In a sense she learns to reparent herself within a much larger and all embracing context. Through her experience of meeting an all loving archetypal mother figure in the Black Lab, she incorporates and assimilates a positive transpersonal experience of the unconditioned love of the universal Mother. She describes an expansive experience of being held by a sense of compassion and unconditional love that is without limits. The qualities of love and compassion are responsive expressions that unfold from awareness of actuality and genuine encounter. The Gestalt approach of direct experience brings these qualities into the present moment through an embodied experience of inseparability or wholeness.

The Gestalt experiment provides a very precise container to work with difficult and strong emotions in a way that allows them to be owned, accepted and resolved (Perls, 1969). In this way energy that was once bound up is now available to be safely and creatively channeled into life-affirming attitudes and actions. Most therapeutic applications of Gestalt seem to address two sides of the same coin of loss: grief and anger. The dramatization of a dream or inner dialogue helps us to understand how much we resist the inner experience of these emotions and how they persistently fight our resistance in order to manifest in expression. This polarization often results in a deadlock of energy that paralyzes awareness, expression, and release of emotion. We often become immobilized between the polarities, swinging between the poles or overidentified with one pole and in denial of the other. One can observe over time how an intentional process of working with polarities can eventually lead to the dissolution of the polar extremes and a meaningful integration of opposites (Perls, 1978).

All of Trish’s sessions demonstrated how these polarities were evident in her mind and body experience. In the first Gestalt enactment of her family, we saw the experience of her mother invading her space and the wisdom of the young child in escaping and seeking refuge with the family dog. Here we see a reiterating pattern of escape both from the pain of her experience and from human contact. In the second enactment Trish is polarized between the Deaf world and the Hearing world, and expressed that there was nowhere she felt she truly belonged. It was only after connecting to a naked, authentic sense of her own being that she experienced freedom to be wholly herself in the classroom setting. In their empathic response her classmates added to a new and corrective experience of self-acceptance and connection with others. In the third experiment Trish’s dream illustrates a polarity between an internal part that induces suffering for her and an internal part that experiences suffering. In meeting the dream image that appears as “other”, the Black Lab, she discovers compassion that is inherent in her being through this symbolic embodiment of the Bodhisattva. This polarity resolves itself when, through this compassionate openness, she experiences the depth of her grief caused by her perception of separateness in the world.

In providing a safe setting for the physical expression of strong emotions, we learn to respect and accept the emotional intelligence and strength of our bodies. We also learn to understand the root of the emotion and learn compassion for ourselves through a deeply felt acceptance of the loss that precipitated it. When the experience is fully embraced in a
therapeutically safe environment, we do not become habituated to intense emotions and have to repeat them over and over again. Both inside and outside of the therapeutic setting, individuals can become addicted to the tears or rage of a cathartic experience if the root of the emotion is not thoroughly exposed, accepted, and then naturally released. This can take varying lengths of time depending on the depth or repetition of the original pain-inducing situation. A wise facilitator has to carefully guide the client to contain the energy inside the therapeutic setting when it may extend over time and numerous gestalt sessions.

**Trish and Deborah:**

The connection and understanding that come from sharing suffering and the relief of suffering are a manifestation of the sacred and central to the practice of transpersonal psychotherapy. We connect with one another by getting inside the painful experiences in ourselves and others and move from individual suffering to a sense of shared humanity that occurs through feeling and holding the pain as a group. This creates an opportunity for the relief of suffering for the individual and the community, as well as appreciation for the collective journey of humankind. A relational field is created by the meeting of individuals that is beyond and greater than each person’s separate experience. This transpersonal event is described in the I-Thou encounter as a “between” phenomenon and is further explicated in the dialogical approach where the relational field is the primary healing medium of psychotherapy (Hycner 1991). In our example, the group provides a context for the experience of transformational healing when all members participate in the I-Thou occurrence.

Because it lays bare so much of our humanity by bringing us into the present moment, the Gestalt approach is a tremendously powerful tool in accessing transpersonal and spiritual domains. It is remarkably flexible and adaptable in its strategies of creating meaningful relationship that is open and fresh. This mutual entrance into the fertile void provides the ground for an appreciation of diversity and uniqueness among the individuals involved. A sense of responsibility and inter-being flows out of the experience of contact and actuality that awareness makes possible. The tools of dramatic enactment, art making, family sculpture, kinesthetic embodiment, and active dialogue make gestalt a uniquely accessible approach when working with special populations, particularly individuals with auditory impairment, physical differences, and disabilities. As two women with physical differences and disabilities who have worked intimately with the gestalt approach, we hope that this paper will be helpful to others in working with their clients.

**References**


