

The Art of Transmutation: Gestalt in Nature

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“Life is universal, and there is nothing dead or inanimate in the whole of nature.”

The above statement transcribed around the 8th century recognizes the profound truth of the whole of humanity. Arriving at this understanding culminated from inner searching of the essence of human nature.

It was not unusual throughout human evolution for the awakened few that searched for meaning, and questioned the status quo to risk death as the potential cost for the liberation of the mind. Dominant political and religious institutions feared chaos and lack of control if the truth of divine nature were told. Despite the risk of harm, the inner quest of humankind resurrects itself every few generations, or cycles through centuries, perhaps. Nonetheless, the subtle, and sometimes radical pursuit of life animated is timeless. A more striking stain in history occurred during the medieval ages, when Alchemists believed,

“Let none set himself up to study Alchemy until, having cleared and purified his heart, he be emptied of all things impure. Let him be charitable, and let him enjoy constant tranquility, so that his mind be lifted up. For, unless it be kindled with the beam of the divine light, it will hardly be able to penetrate the mysteries of nature.”

(Canons of Espagnet) (Hager, 1997)

The highest wisdom was considered in knowing oneself. *“The ultimate perfection of man, ... is the recognition of man’s unity with the whole of nature.”*

This did not mean necessarily intellectual, scholarly pursuits, but in the inquiry of the depth of meaning and comprehension of the “metamorphosing of humans with plants and animals,” This pursuit became what was considered “a walk in the forbidden zone,” So much that special codes, symbolism, and objects were used to pass messages in discovering the “elixir of truth.” (Hager, 1997)

Historically, as societies moved toward industrialization and advanced technology, individual’s moved away from the meditative and contemplative centering, and the overall grappling with the human spirit. Psychology, still in its infancy in the late 1800’s spurred a scientific approach of human behavior, and eventually reduced the view of the mind to a chain of stimulus and response. This grew from years of struggling with a professional identity, and striving for credibility in a field accused of lacking science. Trying to fit into a contemporary mold that consists of the total mechanization of society has led to what Paracelsus claimed centuries ago, “Scientific investigation has destroyed the world of the soul.” We have become the system in Stanley Kuber’s “A Clockwork Orange,” where “dear” Alex’s plight is pairing the world of opposites that include the beauty of Beethoven’s cherished 5th, with the desecration and despair of humankind. The government has become what is so blatantly stated in “V for Vendetta,” a “people feared by the government, as opposed to the government feared by the people”.

Whenever a culture imprisons itself in fear, then individually there will be a manifestation of psychological disorders, physical illness, and massive disease trends, such as heart disease, cancer, etc. All of these manifestations reflect the fragmented

being; parts of the self separated from the whole, so that the self literally is **dis-ordered**, lacking a frame for which to stand.

This unraveling of the human spirit is also wrought with language-based stories that serve to dispel the truth of our nature; namely that we are all one, by instilling stories of separation, conquering attitudes, and domination over other cultures, animals, and all of nature. An integrative being, or as Maslow termed, the “self-actualizing” person, comprehends beyond the illusion of these “stories” and functions with a sense of loving attachment to the material world.

Carl Rogers, one of the prominent Psychologist’s in Humanism coined the phrase “congruity.” Congruity, he stated was the distance between the gap of the “real” self, and the “ideal” self. The “ideal” self can be thought of as the conditions that culture places’ on one’s idea of being “good,” “successful,” or cooperative within the confines of conventional norms. The “real” self is the authentic self. The self, unfolding within the organismic structure it was designed to be. Rogers felt that every organism, whether flower, or bird, manifested unique greatness as a part of its individual significance. In other words, as a part of a living dynamic substance, it allows itself to express beauty within its own way, at its own time.

Each human being also expresses her or his beauty as an unfolding divine tapestry as a unique fit within an integral whole. This is the real self, the self that truly knows its own nature.

Congruity, then becomes the distance between the conditional self, and the authentic self; the greater the distance, the greater the fragmented self. This, according to Rogers is where psychological disorders’ reside. (Corey, 2005)

Humanism can be seen as “a multifaceted approach to human experience and behavior, focuses on an individual’s self-actualization and uniqueness, with choice and integration ensuing” (Kirchner, 2003).

In the course of Ecopsychology nature-connected themes are a paramount method and ideology to facilitate the path of integration, and close the gap of self-alienation. The idea primarily is to increase an individual’s exposure to elements of nature while chiseling away at old brain stories. For instance, in a study that increased smiling, and closer proximity, by presenting flowers to persons on an elevator, showed that just by the stimulus (flower), the respondent (person on an elevator) appeared to smile more, engage in conversation, and stand closer to the person giving the flower. (Jones, Rosario, Wilson, Mcquire, 3:104-132). This study implies that the presence of flowers may be one way to decrease feelings of alienation, and increase a sense of belonging between people.

There are many ways in which the field of Ecopsychology can be an agent of change in assisting individuals in healing one’s own nature, so that nature as a whole is healed, and sustainable. This paper will focus primarily on the integration of counseling theories, namely Gestalt, applied within a nature-connected theme. The idea is driven by the nature of Gestalt, which has it’s underpinnings in here, and now thinking. It is also a synthesis of “existential philosophy, phenomenology, holism, humanism, bio-energetics, orthodox and interpersonal psychoanalysis, and Eastern philosophies (Swanson, C., & Lichtenberg, P. (1998)). There has also been a large contribution from Kurt Lewin’s field theory that believes that “organisms exist only in environmental contexts with reciprocal influences on each other.” This implied to nature means that it would be impossible for an individual to independently gain self-understanding without the reciprocity of the

organism, nature. One can not simply see the self without a reflection. Nature is that reflection.

The beauty of Gestalt therapy is the aliveness and excitement it brings to an encounter, and the awareness of choice that a person has in creating her or his life. A person is seen as a whole, unlike current trends in psychotherapy that reduces individuals to parts, or symptoms. As a whole being, the aim of therapy is health, not pathology. Each person is viewed as unique and innately possesses the awareness to increase contact with personal responsiveness and responsibility (Yontef, 1993). Each person is also considered a co-creation, interactive and interconnected, and an “interdependent totality.”

Through the process of contact, often called the “lifeblood of growth,” an individual experiences a creative and dynamic unfolding in present time that allows for fulfillment, psychological survival, and maturity (Polster, & Polster, 1973). Contact is paramount to a fully integrating being, and disturbances in emotional regulation occur when contact is severed. Most individuals avoid contact, or the immediacy, and this can occur in the simple process of creating a grocery list while participating in an uncomfortable corporate meeting. Many of these avoidances lie just beyond awareness, so the theme of awareness is “the beating heart” of Gestalt therapy (Crocker, 1999).

Awareness can be defined as “being in touch with one’s existence inclusive of all senses at a given moment.” (Yontef, 1993)) This is a much resonated theme in nature-connection activities. By becoming aware of the fragile infrastructure of an orange that CJ discovered during an artistic adventure is an example of this awareness, in the moment, as manifested through dialogue. Awareness is then channeled through the process of sharing and dialogue. Dialogue, in a sense, becomes the ground for deepening

awareness and self-realization. It is the genuine language spoken that reflects the power of an “I-thou” exchange, that includes the creation of something greater than the two. Sharon describes the below experience that shows how dialogue reflects an innermost discovery, “ I especially wanted to honor and made a little altar/sculpture out of the things and put it at the base of the tree. It felt good to do this both through the gathering process and through creating something for the tree. Everyday I can now watch how this gift changes and goes back to the earth in a different form...”

The format for sharing profound experiences is approached with an open mind, allowing for the fluidity of the experiences. It requires a bit of courage to be completely “here and now,” and present-centered. As Perls stated in 1969, “reality exists in the moment as a novel experience.” It is the primary ingredient that fosters personal growth. Nature is always in the moment, and Gestalt therapy equally shares this meaning in the moment phenomena, as that person’s subjective encounter reveals.

In Amy’s remarkable discovery of the voices in nature, she writes, “Each of the nature elements I focused on definitely had its own unique sound that just bubbled out of me. The moon was an upper pitched ahhhh sound; the setting sun was a slight lower than mid-range ooooo sound; the mountains were kind of like a yah a ha yah a ha sound-it was very native sounding, little higher pitched the snow sound had a natural vibrato of like a yee ye ye kind of sound-also native sounding, and the cold was the deepest tone I could make.” This journey’s dialogue is experienced as a present-centeredness; there is no anticipation of future, festering over the past, just a sense that the moment is real.

Gestalt therapy honors the individual self not as a fixed entity, but as a “reified unit,” constantly changing according to needs and environmental stimuli. “The

self...comes to life in the encounter with the world.” Because of this dynamic, the self is an agent of growth, and the product of relational experiences (Miller, 1994). Each person becomes an energetic participant within her or his field of contact. As mentioned previously, contact is a pre-requisite for growth and change. One can engage in methods to manipulate the environment to protect oneself from impending awareness, and ultimate change. A classic example is the Fritz Perl’s therapeutic encounter, with a client, “Gloria,” in which Gloria, frightened and insecure during the session, wishes to go to a corner to hide. The dialogue ensues when the metaphor of wanting to be rescued arises, and Gloria realizes she possesses the natural traits of a confident woman, and not a scared child all along. She uncovers this awareness of the frightened child when Perls not only refuses to rescue her, but also refuses to acknowledge the phony layer that Gloria portrays in her drama of hiding (Corey, 2005).

When an individual is unable to make this leap of awareness in the presence of someone who can support genuine contact, and dispel inauthentic experience, then a person reaches a stuck point, often referred to as an impasse. An impasse, simply stated is an interruption of contact. Individuals may do this by repeating old styles of thinking and behaviors, similar to embracing rather than challenging old-brain stories, engaging in substitute methods to have a contact boundary, through addictions, and self-alienation. Almost all of the work in Gestalt therapy occurs at the contact boundary.

Berger (2006) writes extensively of the issue of the “rupture between human communities and the natural world,” and how this separation has contributed to poor emotional functioning. Nature can be a vital source in expanding the therapeutic encounter, so that nature becomes a co-therapist. Therapy in nature allows the flowing,

dynamic and expanding relationship to unfold, in the moment. The issues around resisting contact can then be readily seen as an individual creates the drama that can bring the background, or individual history, into the foreground to be attended to.

Human beings are designed to create closure. For instance, a gestalt view of post traumatic stress is the replaying of wounded scenes in an attempt to gain closure. An individual cannot erase the traumatic event because it may have no ending, or the ending is too unbearable for the psyche to integrate. For instance, Berger (2006) describes a therapeutic encounter in nature that a participant reveals. In attempting to symbolize the loss of a loved one, the participant created a sculpture along the river bank drawing a bridge between two stick figures. She then covered this with fresh flowers that she found nearby. The next day, the participant discovers the dry, dying flowers on top of her sculpture. Nature, the co-therapist helps the participant comprehend the life-death-life cycle of nature to deal with her loss.

The gestalt view of closure not being realized is referred to as unfinished business. Unfinished business interferes with the formation of growth, freedom, and fulfillment. An unfulfilled life is one anchored in unfinished business.

There are many ways in which nature can restore the alienated or fragmented self; the self cloaked in shadows of unfinished business. One method often practiced throughout the course is giving nature a voice. This process allows for disowned aspects of oneself to learn to make peace with other parts of the self, so that the process of integration can occur. Amy displayed this lost part by carrying around the unfinished business of finding her own voice. A dream using a phone as the backdrop allowed Amy

to visualize the lost connections she was creating by not using her own voice. Amy was then able to reconstruct this voice by recognizing elements of her voice in nature.

When one willfully participates in becoming the voice of nature amazing peace and serenity transpires. Albie makes this point in the following:

Turquoise is the color of the infinite expanse of ocean

I am turquoise when I live like my Hopi friends, close to earth's magnetic blue stones

Pink is the sky, weaving through the clouds, painting a backdrop for gliding seahawks

I am pink like the inside of a conch shell, like my grandmother's skin, like your smile feels

One can sense in the above images how the portrayal of color enhances the connective relationships by bringing nature into the partnership of life.

Creating a voice that teaches can be performed with any person who may experience a form of self-alienation. Any thing from relationship difficulty, career exploration, children coping with divorce are all means that nature can co-create. For instance, a young college student who suffered from drug addictions, since the age of 12, worked with me for three years. Initially, he had been resistant to working in nature, but gradually we combed cemeteries, splashed water in ravines, and cooled off in deep pools of water caressed by hanging valleys. This gradual process of discovering nature was similar to peeling the layers of an onion. Each session in nature created a new discovery, a reassurance of stability, and the capacity to connect with something authentic that wasn't trying to steal from him. He worked through his anger by throwing rocks into the

water, he spilled tears while shivering in a torrential downpour, and he felt pain in his feet swollen with blisters from a day's long journey.

This young man learned that his pain, joy, and contentment was all apart of himself celebrated in nature, and that nature would not judge, condemn, ridicule, or abandon him.

Applying Gestalt therapy in nature is a process that asks an individual to willingly experiment with awareness and contact. Awareness is a comprehensive process that assesses not just one's thinking, but bodily sensations, emotional responses, distance to and from objects, and a person's range of choices about he or she is currently living life (Kirchner, 2003). The question asked is HOW a person is creating life in a certain way, not WHY a person came to be as he or she is. The approach is grounded in a person's subjective view of the world, not a standardized view of how the world ought to be. A difference in asking how, and not why is amazingly validating. Why denotes cause, blame, and creates an externalizing viewpoint. How denotes self-regulation of oneself. A closer introspection that suggests what one created, one can re-create, always rediscovering the self. This also suggests a proactive life, not a reactive life.

“The person with psychological health lives in the present moment with awareness, cognizant of the past and filled with the excitement of the future. To move with vigor and liveliness toward higher levels of growth is healthy and functioning (Perls, 1969). In our contemporary western world, the view of mental disorders is primarily seen from a reductionist standpoint, that is, one reports symptoms of psychological distress, than is systematically provided with chemicals to decrease symptoms. This approach only

increases fragmentation, and self-alienation as the disturbance is seen as within the person.

The Gestalt approach, similar to nature-connection work, is that an individual experiences a growth disorder, or organismic disorder, one in which the mind and body are functioning separately. There is generally a loss of internal awareness (needs, wants, and desires), and self-responsiveness (experiences and good contact). The free flowing self is blocked, and/or distorted, and mind becomes a trickster creating erroneous assumptions and conclusions about the world. For the most part, psychological dysfunction is viewed as “creative adaptations to inhospitable situations in a person’s life” (Crocker, 1999). The self, through repeated exposure to old stories becomes fixed, and creates inauthentic layers to survive. One recognizes that authentic support is limited, and seeks to control one’s world through excessive manipulation of one’s environment. The personality, for the most part, doesn’t recognize the holistic being, and limits itself to a certain contact style. One example of a contact style is saying, “I hate people who lie.” This style is called projection, because as a pattern the person is suggesting, “I hate myself when I am not truthful, and I am living an untruthful life.”

One way to break contact boundaries is to allow nature to be the crucible of change. For instance, in a setting of the person’s choice (sitting in the sun, walking in the woods) ask the person to play the game of “I take responsibility for . . .” In this game, look around the area and comment on any litter, decaying trees, etc. and start the sentence with, “I take responsibility for the crushed, dying leaves.” Then translate this to, “I take responsibility for the part of me that feels crushed and dying.” This process resurrects disowned parts, and begins to pave the way toward an integrated self.

Nature connected therapy is also grounded in silence and reverence for a particular surrounding. Attention to bodily sensations, and how the body moves, and with what degree of fluidity is important to listen to. In Gestalt therapy silent moments can be exaggerated, as well as focus on what the body is doing. For instance, if a person is sitting on a rock, and tapping his foot incessantly, asking the person to tap even faster draws the awareness to this pattern of contact. Perhaps allowing the tapping voice to speak, first as a foot, then second as the rock being pounded on, again draws awareness.

The current course, tailored to elicit individual experiences of nature-connection activities, than interwoven with the shared journey of other class mates, yields a method for self-understanding, and appreciation for the wholeness of group contact. In this arena, each member is encouraged to reveal how an activity was felt, sensed, and re-educated. The result is greater self-awareness, awareness of other, and new found perspective on how to live life more harmoniously, and to stay in touch with the process of life.

The process of discovery is a continuous exploration, and with the various techniques applied from a gestalt framework can deepen and enhance this discovery through the process of owning contact. Integrating gestalt with nature diminishes the splitting off of the self that serves to plague individuals with self-doubt. When there is self-doubt, there is self-alienation. These two dance to the rhythm of old-brain stories and plug awareness from reaching the mouth of the river.

Gestalt therapy in nature promotes the revelation of truth, the unraveling mystery of the self, the essence of holism in nature. Nature is the elixir of truth.

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