

Gestalt

2nd Year

Assignment 2: Self Discovery Essay

November 2006

“What have you discovered about yourself, especially your style of making contact (or not making contact) during the time of your training, through your

experiences within the group, your personal therapy sessions, your work and your relationships outside the group.”

If I look back on myself prior to starting Gestalt, I realise that I was very repressed and my ability to make contact while better than many, was restricted by my lack of connection with myself. Over the last two years I have changed beyond recognition to the people I know and feel freer than I have ever imagined possible. And so have my relationships. For clarity, I have broken down the topic under headings, based on the various relationships being discussed.

Myself

Looking back now, I realise I had no contact with myself - I was completely out of touch with my feelings, I felt little or no stress or anxiety, expressed no anger but exploded into rage for small things, teared up when I least expected it and had completely repressed my sexuality to the point where I was yearning for tenderness but felt I could quite happily do without sex. Basically I was on the wrong end of the scale when it came to my emotions. One of my closest friends described me as 'closed' which I now understand ... I had closed off my feelings from myself and so I had closed them off from everyone else as well. Up until I started Gestalt, I would feel upset every time I looked at photographs of myself as a child without understanding why, and so had learned to avoid them altogether. Now I realise it was because I had so much pent up grief and sadness surrounding my childhood that it was yearning to be let out.

Now I am gentler and more compassionate with myself. My critic is much quieter and gentler and so for the most part, I am not beating myself up so much any more. Instead of being irritated by others, I am questioning what it is in myself that I am projecting onto them that I don't like (although it makes life a lot less fun!). I have become much more aware of my introjects and can often but not always see where I have picked up during my past, someone

else's view and made it a judgement of my own. I am aware of some of my retroreflections although it's fair to say that I am still working on the most caustic of them.

Now, I am absolutely in touch with my sadness, I can experience the fullness I had never been able to comprehend before, I am fully and consciously exploring my sexuality and have slowly but surely been releasing my anger and learning how to honour it as part of who I am. In the words of Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (1951), I have now added '*proprioception*' to '*exteroception*' – allowing myself to experience the feelings I receive inside my body in my muscles, joints and tendons as well as the experiences I have always had from my five external senses. People have commented that now I stand differently with a taller, straighter posture. Being a Will Structure body character type as described by Kepner (2004), I am not sure if that is because I feel relieved of all the responsibility or because my confidence has grown since my critic has subsided. Either way, I certainly feel different. This new confidence has encouraged me to dress differently in a way that honours my body, my personality and my sexuality, rather than trying to conceal them and after years of hiding myself in my clothes, I find that quite exciting.

Group

Over the two years, I have been told by members of the group how much I have changed. How I have gone from being closed and angry, to being open, warmer and more contactful. For me, I feel like I have always been honest and direct and very true to myself in terms of expressing how I feel. However, I used to worry about what they would think, how much time I was taking up, that their needs were more important than mine and that what I had to say would be stupid or misunderstood. I still have moments of insecurity, but for the most part I don't worry too much about what they think any more, so long as I am clear and have expressed myself correctly so there's no misunderstanding. In part, that is because I have

much more confidence but it is also because I am not gauging my sense of self externally any more but rather internally.

At the Miriam and Rudolf workshop, I really heard their comments on “I am enough” and have tried to take that into my very being. It’s also extended itself out to the rest of the group, that for me, they each are enough too. Like me, they are not perfect but they are special and unique and in their imperfection, they are beautiful. That acceptance has completely changed how I relate to everyone around me.

I realise now that I was a rescuer and so had no boundaries around others when they needed support. I felt compelled to help them out and in fact felt better myself when I had done so. For a long time in the group, everyone else’s needs were more important than my own and I was much more comfortable looking after others than looking after myself. That ended me up in a bit of trouble with one or two members of the group but it also meant that I can see very clearly when I started to change, when I started to put in boundaries so that I could look after myself first. Initially it was because I felt they couldn’t support themselves and so I didn’t want to try and support them on my own, but I also feel that it was because it was taking so much effort to just stay afloat for myself, that I finally realised I had no resources to spare for anybody else. In hindsight, I realise that I had to create this enormous amount of chaos in my life and to bring myself to my knees in June last year, to force myself to look after my own needs first.

My need in the group for the first year or more was for everybody to get on and for everybody to like me. I hated and was triggered by any form of conflict. On the scale used by Glasl (1999), I was almost at the *Conflict Shy* end, completely opposite to *Belligerent* and nowhere near *Able*. Interestingly, I was on occasion the source or the target of the conflict which upset me terribly, but I took comfort in the knowledge that I would have four years to sort out the issue! I have always been naturally honest and direct and so I endeavoured over the first

year to raise any issues I had with the other members of the group, one on one. I realise now that I was doing this to avoid conflict, because by confronting the problem we could work it through and at the very least, I wouldn't have the discomfort of feeling they were upset with me, or the worry of what they were thinking or saying about me behind my back. This has been a common practice throughout my adult life. Finally, I have come to accept that its okay now not to be liked by everyone ...I've realised that I don't like everyone else so why should they all like me? That has been very liberating.

When I first got into Gestalt, I realised that when somebody put me down, I gave away my power and retreated into myself, feeling ashamed and beating myself up for being stupid. Now I understand that when somebody else puts me down, it is because they also have their own issues, their own projections, their own introjections and so on and what I have to say is as valid as anything they might say or think. So although it can still hurt, I don't retreat as easily or if I do, I come back out again very quickly. I have only recently learned to use a formula which allows me to say what happened and how I interpreted that and how it made me feel, without shaming the other person and without them feeling attacked and becoming defensive or angry. This last week, I have learned that I need to do that much more quickly, as any delay after the initial incident gives my imagination too much time to exercise!

Probably the most significant change for me in the group is my willingness to be seen. At the start of last year I could not look people in the eye when I was feeling vulnerable or exposed. At the workshop with Ari, he walked me around the inside circle of the group encouraging me to look into the eyes of everyone there after I had opened myself up to probably the deepest level I have ever experienced in Gestalt. Looking into their eyes was one of the most difficult things I have ever had to do in my life and I felt completely traumatised afterwards. Now at the end of second year, when I spoke to the group recently about an incident with my brother which happened when we were children, I was able to look every member of the group in the eye, without any shame or embarrassment. I trusted they would support me and if not, then I

was more concerned about their judgement of him than I was for myself, because for me, the fact that I was okay about it was more important than whether or not they were.

I have always had a problem doing work at the front of or in the middle of the group and in fact, had only ever done work in the group when my emotions had overflowed and I couldn't contain myself any longer and was invited by the facilitator to speak. I had so many issues about people seeing me from behind, being out in the centre for everyone to see, not being able to see what people were thinking and being the centre of attention etc, that I could not bear to go into the middle of the room, which I felt at the start of this term, was beginning to stifle my progress.

In class just before the residential, I volunteered to do my first piece of work in the group and spoke for the first time in a year, about my break-up with my ex-husband. At the residential, I sat in the fish-bowl and although I didn't say anything, just being there was such an enormous achievement. On the final day of the weekend, I stood up in front of the entire group to honour my brother for the support he has given me over the last two years. On the same day last year, he had asked me to do speed contact with him in the middle of the group and I had refused because getting into the centre of the room was too confronting. Only he and my own group knew what a huge achievement that was for me and I still feel very full when I remember it – although I was shaking convulsively before, during and after it!

Family

I realised during the floor exercise on the Contact Cycle that with my family of origin, I used to break out of the cycle before taking action. I projected onto my brothers and sister how they were going to react and then rather than risk conflict and their 'inevitable' rejection, I avoided them until the issue had either been buried or at least had become less figural. Now I am able to ask if they are available to support me and hear their response without feeling

rejected if they are not. When my eldest brother in his concern for me, offered support by criticising my ex-husband, I found great personal power in setting a boundary by being able to say that I valued and needed his support, but not his criticism. Now that I am no longer confluent, I feel so much stronger and therefore secure in my relationship with my siblings.

In my relationship with my brother here in Australia, I always looked up to him and depended on him for support, but rarely in the past few years had I felt that I had been able to support him. As a result, although we were very close, we rarely had what I considered was a true meeting. In his view, this was because he felt I was unavailable for support, that I was not able to support myself and so therefore could not support him. It's taken some time to realise that now we are having full contact: we are meeting as adults, as peers, and we discuss our own insights as well as how we experience each other's processes in workshops. The mutual respect, the honesty, the availability and the freedom of expression we have in the knowledge that we can both support ourselves has led to a richness of contact in our relationship that I never imagined.

Perhaps the most painful awareness and change has come from my relationship with my ex-husband. I was shocked to realise last year that he and I were completely confluent in our relationship. He didn't need me emotionally and as long as I didn't need him, we got along fine. But during the times when I most needed support, I would crave contact and would seek him out to get it. Given that he was unavailable to meet that need in me (which is why I unconsciously went there), it would inevitably result in a huge row. I know now that we needed anger to break out of our confluence and it was at least contact. That would usually eventually lead to us talking and a connection of sorts.

Now we have no expectations of each other so the tension has eased and I find that the less I look to him to support me, the more available he is. (Not sure what that's about yet.) I do know that as I have changed, our relationship has changed and the tension and the anger

(my anger at least), for the most part have subsided. When I mentioned to him recently that in June last year I was in genuine risk of harming myself (based on the discussion we had in group about Ethics: A Gestalt of Values (Lee, 2004), he said that he had known that, but didn't know how to support me and so left me alone and hoped I wouldn't "do anything stupid". I realise now that he who had depended so much on me to be self-reliant, must have felt engulfed when I would overload and 'break down' and his response was flight. Looking back now without blame or judgement, I realise how dysfunctional our relationship was, how little contact we had and why I had felt so incredibly lonely.

My relationship with my children has always been strong and we have thankfully always talked a great deal to each other. I have since they were toddlers, endeavoured to answer all their questions and have found since an early age, that they only ask what they are ready to hear the answer to. During the entire time I have been involved in Gestalt, I have taken the time to explain to them in terms they can understand, the insights I have been having about myself, about my relationships and about us as a family.

This has led to incredible conversations and after a family constellations workshop, my daughter asked "How do they know so much about me?" when I relayed the insights I had had during a process on our family. My two older children have learned so much about me and why I live the life I do that I feel genuinely accepted by them and I know from what they tell me and others close to them that they love, respect and admire both their father and I which means more to me than anything.

I believe that with my children, I experience the complete contact cycle. Occasionally a friend or family member will question whether I tell them too much but my experience, together with my older son and daughter's confirmation makes me confident that the contactful relationship I have with my children, has given them a level of maturity and wisdom which has allowed them to come through the break-up of our marriage as healthy and secure

individuals. Although I try not to lean on them for support, I do ask for their input on the big decisions in our lives: for example, should we move house, or schools or on buying and selling our business and they are always objective, considered and supportive in their responses with a wisdom I often don't get from some of the adults I know.

Having this year read a book called "How not to argue with your kids" (Gibson, (2006)), I realised that the active listening I have practised during most of my career at work, I was not doing with my children. Now instead of saying no, I acknowledge how my kids must be feeling about a decision they do not like and it feels like now we are meeting instead of missing each other and ending up in a row. That has been a huge learning for me this year.

Friendships

Over the past two years I have lost three of my closest friends which has been extremely painful. I realise through therapy that I must be a fairly scary person these days, having changed careers, bought a business, broken up with my husband when there was nothing apparently wrong with our marriage and went from earning incredible sums of money to having almost no income. But perhaps most confronting of all must be the change to my personality. I have gone from being repressed and unemotional (ie perceived as strong), to being openly emotional and in touch with every inch of my being (ie perceived as emotional). And if I'm fair, I've probably become quite an intense person in terms of conversation now because the small talk just doesn't do it for me any more!

I believe I had good contact with these three friends and so it's not so much that my contact with them has changed I don't think, as much as we have stopped seeing each other. Until this moment, I have believed that they stopped seeing me, but I realise now that two of them hurt me and the third didn't seek me out after I had told her about my husband and I breaking

up and so I suppose I have unconsciously stopped seeing them. I still have some work to do around this.

With another two of my close friends who like me are strong, self-supporting, professional women, one has been on her own personal journey with Gestalt and as she and I have grown, our relationship has also grown. Together we learned how to ask for support when we need it, how to show our vulnerability, how to be seen. We have supported each other through our processes and have a level of contact with each other now that surpasses anything we ever had before because we are completely authentic with each other. I have no doubt that I am a better therapist because of the deep connection we have through Gestalt.

My relationship with the other friend has changed because I have changed. Because I have begun to show my vulnerability, she too has begun to show hers and we are now having the deepest contact we have ever had in the nine years I have known her.

In both relationships, I feel that my needs are being met and so are theirs. That we each get equal space and accept the other for whom we are. There are a number of people whom I would have called friends for many years whom I now realise are not really interested in me. They talk about themselves and what's happening in their lives and with about five minutes of time left they will ask about me. I know I could demand the space and I also know because I am a good listener and because most people are just dying to be heard, that I encourage them, but I honestly feel that I have outgrown these relationships, that life is too short and precious to be spending with people with whom I cannot really connect, who are not really interested in connecting with me. Slowly but surely I am starting to let these relationships go.

Another friend is a guy I have been close to since I came to Australia. I found with him the contact I was craving but not receiving from my ex-husband. In fact, he was the person who

made me realise that I had lost my sense of self and had become the roles I played: mother, wife, sister, professional etc. For years I have looked up to him as the person who had opened my eyes and turned on the lights because he is somebody who “had done his work”. However, since Gestalt, my level of awareness and availability has in many ways, now surpassed his. With my new sense of self and my new confidence in myself, I realise now that I no longer need him in the way I used to. That’s become an interesting dynamic in our relationship and has meant that I am available to support him when he needs it as he supported me, but I am no longer confluent in the relationship.

On the other hand, I have formed a couple of new and very deep friendships, with one of the males in Group and a man outside the group whom I have known for about sixteen months. I have also grown very close to two of the females in the group, both of whom I have a very special bond with. In these two women, I see a mixture of strength and vulnerability, a sense of fun and an honesty and directness that really appeals to me. With each of them, I experience great empathy and find equal support – I know they can and will allow me to support them, as I know they can and will support me when I need it. One of the two and I often do work together in our triads and even outside of the group – she is one of the few students whom I trust completely to hold the space for me. They have become very special in my world although the fact that we only connect through Gestalt and not through the rest of our lives means that I am careful not to hope they will be lifelong relationships in case they are not.

I have an incredibly contactful relationship with the man in the group to whom I am close. We support each other, act as therapist for each other and I have had as many insights in my conversations with him as I have had in personal therapy. In particular, he has given me such clarity around relationships and me in relationships and has been able to explain the man’s perspective on incidents that have happened in my relationships. We have a very deep level of intimacy and honesty and he has become one of my closest friends and

certainly the one person with whom I share most, with the exception of my male friend outside the group.

With him I experience the full cycle of contact and I revel in the fact that it is nourishing and fulfilling for us both – completely and fully meeting. In our newly discovered authenticity, we have connected through our joy, our sadness (but in Group only), our anger and to a degree, our sexuality (ie we have discussed the male/female dynamic in our relationship), but we have maintained very clear boundaries. We both love that we can have such an intimate and fulfilling relationship and even have the sexual tension, without actually having a sexual relationship. That is something I have only recently learned how to have. Until Gestalt, I would have been attracted to him sexually because of the intimate connection we have ... I have only recently learned that sexuality and intimacy are two very different things. I have always been attracted to older men and what I have learned through my relationship with him, is why. I am attracted to their life experience, their personal power as a result of their life experience and the security and protectiveness they can afford me because of that personal power.

On the other hand, the man outside the group is the one person in my entire field of family, friends, colleagues etc with whom I am completely, utterly and unequivocally authentic. I realised just a few weeks ago that he is the only person in my life with whom I do not have a role or do not need to play a role, who has absolutely no expectations of me whatsoever. He has been with me when I have been at the height of my happiness and fullness, the lowest of my sadness and my vulnerability, through my anger and now with him, I have rediscovered my sexuality. For the first time in my life, I have met somebody who can meet me sexually and I feel like the tiger has been unleashed! He is the first person in my life with whom I have been able to connect with fully and completely on every level.

It has been a really new experience for me to be able to get angry and have somebody stand up to me but not get angry or rageful in response. He will get annoyed with me, but refuses to buy into my anger – especially when its about something trivial (which it often is). I feel like I have spent the year or so that I have known him testing him out to see would he collapse, lose his temper or whatever ... always expecting him to let me down. Although we are seeing eachother on a week to week basis, it has been an incredible realisation to know that I can have such a loving relationship with a man. I worried when my husband and I were breaking up that I might have been searching for something that didn't exist. I have always been attracted to repressed men and feared that with this new man I was perhaps repeating the old mistakes. Now I understand that while he is repressed, he is incredibly willing and available to discover himself which he has continued to do at an amazing pace in the year I have known him. I am also aware that it is because I have changed that I can have such a deep connection with a man who is available and so although men who are 'available' are few and far between, I believe I have the capacity to relate to other men like this as well.

Work

In corporate life I have always been contactful in work and in fact, that is what has contributed largely to my success. My skill has been in creating empathy with others by sharing parts of myself that I am comfortable to be open about. This means I can build up a deep level of trust quite quickly with my teams, which allowed me to offer insights and constructive support on how individuals might improve their performance and ultimately improve the overall performance of the team as a result. I think what has changed is that there is much more I am comfortable sharing about myself although I still monitor the level to which I disclose so as not to overwhelm people, given the nature of a corporate environment.

I also find that I now have tools to use to express how I am feeling or how an event has impacted me and regularly use the Marshall Rosenberg model (2003), to avoid shaming the

other or giving them reason to be defensive. While I have always coached others on how to give feedback, I believe my Gestalt training has meant that I have a much better context for supporting them through their personal growth.

I tended to be confluent in so much as I found it hard to say no when somebody would ask me for my time, even if I was flat out myself. Now I have much clearer boundaries and feel confident enough to say no or to suggest another time to meet, while still being compassionate enough that if they need personal support there and then, I will make myself available. (That's part of my job!)

When I was negotiating my contract on two different occasions with the company I work for, I took a gamble and expressed what I felt my value was. Prior to Gestalt I would never have had the confidence or the sense of personal worth to stick my neck out for my own benefit.

Therapy

My relationship with each of my therapists has changed in a similar way to how my relationship with the group has changed. I have gone from feeling ashamed of my tears and embarrassed about my vulnerability to feeling supported and cared for and honoured for the authenticity I bring to my sessions. Whereas I used to dismiss the nice things that Phil would say because I assumed he would have been saying those things to all of his clients, I learned that although he might be saying positive things to each of his clients, he wasn't necessarily saying the same things to them as he was saying to me. Looking back now I realise how difficult it was for me to take any kind of nice feedback because I valued myself so poorly.

Over the six sessions I had with my first client, an adult, in the middle of the year, I felt that I gained confidence in my ability to have a deep connection with him and make real contact. I hadn't expected at the time, to be able to do that. Since then, I have gained more

experience in class and have read a number of books on family therapy. Now with my child client, I feel much more confident in my ability and have felt competent enough to introduce some of Carrell's tools (2001) which have proven very effective. With supervision, I have been able to confirm my progress with her and get ideas and support for moving forward, with both the child and her parents. I feel like I have built a wonderful connection with her and her parents have both expressed their gratitude for the work we are doing and the positive effect it is having on her. Having not wanted to take her on as a client to begin with because I felt inadequately qualified and experienced, it has only confirmed for me that my future is in practising Gestalt therapy with children and families. With both of my clients, I try to live and practice therapy as Victor Levant described Gestalt in his article 'Knowledge, Know-How and Being in Psychotherapy', which for me, was a wonderful summation of what I believe Gestalt is.

On a number of different occasions this term, I have experienced a level of contact with some of my clients which felt like a bolt of electricity between us. I have been amazed that I have the capacity to hold that space, to allow for that level of connection between myself and not only another student, but a non-Gestalt client as well. It has made me realise yet again how lacking the therapy sessions I had with my Jungian therapist in Dublin were before I came to Australia.

Summary

As I try to sum up how I am feeling about contact right now, I am aware of a fullness in my chest – this incredible sense of expansion ... and contentment ... and satisfaction. And that is the best way to describe how my relationships have changed over the last two years: I have a new sense of fullness in my life, I feel expanded as a result, content with myself and very, very, satisfied with my world.

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