

The liminal space and twelve action practices for gracious living

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Received 30 July 2010

Note: This paper represents an abbreviated version of the 2010 Marianne Fry Lecture which I gave in Bristol, UK, on 17 July 2010. I am deeply grateful to the 100 or so people who attended and gave such positive feedback combined with requests for a 'user's guide' to the praxis implications arising from the philosophical and epistemological issues raised in the lecture. (For an online recording of the lecture visit the Marianne Fry website by following this link: <http://www.mariannefrylectures.co.uk/28/2010-lecture-record.html>).

In particular I want to appreciate the direct contribution of Christine Stevens, *BGJ* editor, in firmly steering me towards an 'as simple as possible description of the model and action practices', rather than indulging my predilection for more esoteric musings. This paper is written with Christine's advice very much at the forefront of my mind.

Abstract: This paper uses the terms 'will' and 'grace' to describe a dialectical tension between linear and non-linear change processes. The author argues that it is important to avoid polarisation and instead recognise that both aspects are always present, albeit in differing degrees with differing figure-ground orientations, in all change processes. A definition of liminal space is offered as a point where both will and grace are conjoined in a transformational process aligned with the emerging situation. It is proposed that historically, classical Gestalt psychotherapy theory and training tended towards a will-orientated change process, while recent relational formulations have emphasised grace. The author articulates and defines the action practices and procedural competencies that are supportive of gracious living and also provides a new formulation of the Gestalt cycle that integrates the classical and relational styles of Gestalt psychotherapy theory and praxis.

Key words: Gestalt psychotherapy, relational, liminal, transformation, linear and non-linear change.

Problems of change: capturing the monster

I believe that I am very far from alone amongst my colleagues in the 'caring professions' by having been raised in a somewhat strange or difficult and demanding environment. Within this context, two factors very quickly impressed themselves on my developing mind; first, something/anything/everything needed to change, and second, although this was blindingly obvious, the processes and mechanisms for 'improving' daily life seemed anything but straightforward.

As a psychotherapist, coach, and consultant with some thirty years' experience, these same issues still both fascinate and frustrate me, arising as they do in individual, family, group, and organisational processes. Despite many promises, protocols and procedures

guaranteeing 'change and improvement', we are clearly less in control of ourselves and our lives than we may like to think. Change would seem to be a slippery, unpredictable and somewhat feral beastie!

Linear and non-linear change processes

In my 'day job' I am increasingly involved with strategic management in the British National Health Service. Here, I am often bamboozled by the array of project managers equipped with Gantt charts, decision trees, SMART objectives and SWOT analyses, all designed to 'drive through change'. These products are representative of the agentic, linear change, 'tools and methods' technology that increasingly predominates in both organisational and psychotherapy culture.

Conversely, I am increasingly aware that many of the opportunities that have brought the most change in my own life, and indeed, that of my clients, have seemingly emerged 'out of the blue'. Often, there has been very little formal planning involved, and instead, it is a decision to step forward towards emerging opportunities that is required; a quality of responsiveness, rather than initiation *per se*.

Within the Gestalt community there is an unusual willingness to recognise, discuss and theorise about these second types of 'non-linear' change processes; they lie at the heart of our historical socio-political emphasis on anarchy and also underpin the 'paradoxical theory of change' (Beisser, 1970; Yontef, 2005). Indeed, we often focus on these change elements to the exclusion of acknowledging any role whatsoever of factors such as strategy, planning, discipline, control, design or replication.

In my experience however, close analysis of change experiences seems to reveal that elements of these two kinds of change process are always at work: both linear and non-linear. The two elements exist in a dialectical tension, with differing combinations of figure and ground in each individual process at specific points in time.

The dialectic of will and grace

I have explored this theme in a number of workshops and earlier publications, most notably in 'Will and Grace' (Denham-Vaughan, S., 2005). In that paper, I named the linear, agentic, planned variant of change, will, with grace seeming an appropriate (if unfortunately theistic) word for the non-linear process. This is what I wrote then:

However we define the creative synthesis of Will and Grace, I have encountered it deeply and profoundly through my personal and clinical experience. It is the self-organisation that, on a good day, gives me a life that flows and buzzes with impassioned vitality. It is the self-function that permits me fully to contact and connect with life, and that creates the inspiration that lights up the therapy room in moments when I learn as much, sometimes more, than my clients. On these occasions I hear my own voice saying words I have not rehearsed or consciously thought, but they sound wise (to me!) both in what is said, and also the how and when of the saying. At these times, I have used my Will and all I have consciously learnt to get me to a place where I let go, and the quality of Grace intervenes. As the Hindu Mystic, Sri Ramakrishna (1836–1886), stated, 'the winds of grace are always blowing, but you have to raise the sail'. (p. 12)

In this statement I was attempting to highlight the need for both linear and non-linear change processes to be incorporated in any formulation of change: any

carefully planned, strategic process needs an element of 'luck' to succeed. Conversely, mysterious, magical opportunities seem to occur more frequently when accompanied by specific practices. Within this paper, I am referring to the conjunction of these two processes as the liminal space. However, I will also be attempting to provide a counterbalance to Western popular culture, epistemology, and even praxis, within Gestalt psychotherapy. For that reason, I will be paying specific attention to articulation of the process of grace and twelve action practices for supporting this non-linear aspect of change.

The liminal space

The word liminal is derived etymologically from the Latin *limen* meaning threshold. When behind you lies all that is known, you stand on the threshold of the unknown to which the process of change leads you. This place, space and/or moment in time is characterised by a willingness to let go of anything familiar, and an openness to what is emerging. It lies therefore, at the moment of both being and becoming where the immanent and the transcendent are joined.

An embodied sense of liminal space can be discovered by a 'threshold meditation' (Denham-Vaughan, S., 2010), a process of aligning breathing with a forward and backwards gentle rocking motion in order to discover the phenomenology of inhabiting the multitudinous thresholds offered in every moment. Via practice and immersion in this process, we can also learn about our habitual response to opportunity; whether we shrink, fall back, go boldly forward, leap ahead, wobble, etc.

Anthropologically, the classical view of liminality was proposed by the structuralist, van Gennep (1960). He used the term with particular reference to rites of passage occurring at specific points in the calendar when magic or rituals were incorporated into religious practices to achieve sacred space. The functionalist, Victor Turner (1968), dispensed with using liminality to refer to time and instead reserved the phrase for discussion of the transformation of individuals. His contemporary, Mircea Eliade (1958), however, chose to emphasise temporal or cyclical rites of passage and, staying closer to van Gennep, paid particular attention to religious and spiritual rituals. All three theorists therefore employed the concept of liminality to signal the dissolution of habitual or existent structures and a readiness to see beyond usual individual roles that are inhabited in daily life to a transformative, potentially sacred state.

Within this paper, I am employing the concept of liminal to refer broadly to elements of place, person and time where we are transiting from one 'stage' to

another; literally in 'the between' of a transformation. Jim Denham-Vaughan and Virginia Edmond (Denham-Vaughan and Edmond, 2010), described it thus:

It is to turn away from our fixed understandings and reified self image and enter a transition state full of dynamic possibility. (p. 14)

A liminal space can therefore be signified by various thresholds, such as death or birth, moments before dawn breaks or night descends, and rites of passage and transition. Experiences of pilgrimage, *communitas*, successful teams, and good residential workshops all have these properties of ongoing transition, fluid or 'liquid society' (Bauman 2000), and enhanced flexibility in person-to-person relating.

The concept of liminality has been previously applied when theorising about individual transformative change, most notably by followers of Carl Jung, who have formulated the individuation process of self-realisation as taking place within a liminal space. From this perspective, the process of growth can be formulated as a journey through liminal space, from disorientation to integration and maturity.

Jungians also point to two potential dangers of modern life; either we create no room or space at all for ritual in our lives, 'or we stay in it too long' (Bly, 1991, p. 194), finding this state more attractive and erotic than the mundaneness of our daily lives. I will discuss this particular issue later in this paper.

At this point, however, I am proposing that the concept of liminality and liminal space are deeply compatible with Gestalt psychotherapy's formulation of a dynamic and emergent self arising as a function of changing field conditions (Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, 1951).

Of specific note, the concept of liminal space extends the notion of an emergent individual self to an enhanced relational formulation of an emerging context; one that emphasises individual emergence as indivisibly intertwined with and responsive to a specific situational context, including time and place, as well as person. This formulation is aligned with work by Wollants (2007), Philippson (2001), Spagnuolo Lobb (2003), and others, all of whom emphasise that context and self are always emerging together. Indeed, even in the original formulation of Gestalt psychotherapy theory by Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (1951), these interactional dynamics are, from the first instant, always forming together in the act that Goodman calls 'contact'. As Wollants states, 'the active, dynamic source of what is going on belongs to the global, undifferentiated situation' (2007, p. 133).

From this perspective, 'change failure', stasis, and resistance can be seen as instances where *either* an

individual, group, team, etc., gets ahead of the context, *or* fails to embrace a changing context, and is thereby falling behind. Successful, satisfactory and supported change process would therefore seem to be all about timing and alignment with context; a phenomenon more similar to surfing and the need to catch a passing wave than a strategic, disembodied planning attempt to drive a process through.

Near enemies: limbo and liminoid

Although liminal space and Gestalt psychotherapy theory directly address the complex, dynamic, and interconnected aspects of life in an exciting and revealing way, they are clearly processes viewed as suspect by many people in our culture; but why? One reason I would propose is the confusion of liminal with two near enemies which should be distinguished from it: these are limbo and liminoid.

Limbo comes from the ablative of the Latin word *limbus* meaning edge or margin: literally on the margins. Traditionally, limbo was on the edge of Hell, not in torment, but neither in Heaven: a nowhere place, marginalised for eternity. Such is limbo that it resembles liminal, but without hope of transition or transformation: instead, a falling back into the void. Unable or unwilling to move forward, or to go back, it is a permanent state of stuckness and not at all a threshold of change. In current Western culture, to be stuck is to be atrophied; growth is hugely socially valued and indeed, we have an entire way of life based upon individual and economic expansion – we call it capitalism and often do not recognise how strongly this context configures our actions.

The second concept, liminoid, was coined by Victor Turner (1974) to describe a process of actively seeking strange, unusual, and structureless states of being; to strive to reach a liminal state through our individual actions as opposed to waiting for a wave to carry us. These states signal a recreational attachment to otherness, the novelty or excitement of the liminal, but do not lead to genuine transformation. According to Turner, liminoid states are often characterised by addictive behaviours and frequently accompanied by use of substances both to enhance and try to control the experience of liminal space. It occurs to me that the psychotherapy and spiritual worlds are frequently inhabited by individuals desperately seeking the 'high' of a genuine transformative moment, and mistaking repetitive cathartic or abreactive states for the liminal experience.

But this is not our world

Yet even examining these near enemies does not completely explain our mainstream culture's avoidance and ignorance of the liminal, which, if it is portrayed at all, is seen as weird, 'new-age-ist' and counter-cultural. Our culture has instead bought into the hero myth, of triumph through determination, control and enterprise. 'God helps those who help themselves' was famously declared by Benjamin Franklin (1848), and it remains a core value of our liberal capitalist meritocracy. Positivist science underpins this through valuing only measurable outcomes, and by making measurement and replication essential components of the change process. Reductionism pares down skill, experience, and the enchantment of the 'felt sense', to a set of disembodied operating procedures that require fidelity in performance to achieve the goal of repeatable outcomes. We celebrate individual achievements and heroes, in particular those who seem to have overcome difficulty to master themselves and control situations. Indeed, much of the coaching world focuses on acquisition of a specified set of attributes designed to lead straight to success; a path requiring ruthless determination, total effort, talent and opportunity. In short: will. There is frequently no space left for anything that detracts, or mitigates the driving force towards the goal that has been predetermined. As life continuously offers opportunities, we frequently find ourselves too busy, scheduled or fatigued to take them, and the dimension of grace is ignored, overlooked or dismissed.

An individualistic approach to Gestalt theory

Within the Gestalt psychotherapy literature, too, it is possible to see the impact of will and individualism at the heart of our early theory. Methodologically, therapists tended to focus on the emerging figure rather than the ground/context, had an explicit goal of self actualisation and growth, and an 'overcoming' of 'interruptions' in the classic Gestalt cycle. There was an emphasis on achievement of individual intended outcomes and meeting personal needs, as opposed to evaluation of impact on other people or places. We know that this led to a narcissistic, even cannibalistic attitude to life, whereby context became a resource to meet needs; a phenomenon described eloquently by Staemmler (2009) in his recent book on Aggression.

Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that in almost all Gestalt trainings the legacy of this work is still prevalent. The 'contact cycle' (e.g. Clarkson, 1989) is still a component of most curricula, features in most Gestalt diagnostics and treatment plans, and provides a working methodology for many Gestalt practitioners. While

I do not want to describe the cycle in any detail, I present it below in classic form in order to represent graphically the individualistic and will-based epistemology that is redolent within it.

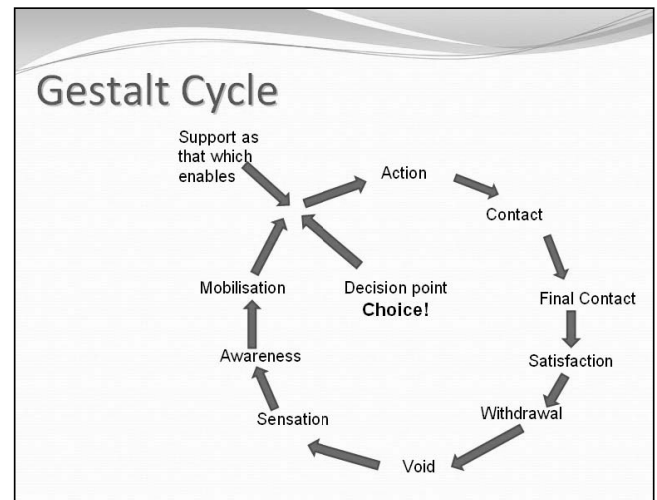


Fig. 1

In particular, in what I want to call classical Gestalt psychotherapy, the therapist is seen to provide support to encourage a forward movement, or next step, around the cycle, towards a completed cycle of experience. Thus, although all Gestalt therapists are steeped in the attitudes of creative indifference to outcome (not process), and paradoxical change theory, there is nonetheless a focus on overcoming of blocks, most frequently between mobilisation and action. In this praxis, the therapist's role is implicitly to enculture authenticity, agency and autonomous resources of self-support, signifying growth. The process, in a nutshell, is to increase awareness of personal needs and enable actions to meet them; this is surely supporting the will and linear dimensions of the dialectic that I have proposed.

Interestingly, more recent arguments concerning this praxis are considered by Lynne Jacobs in her paper, 'That which Enables: Support as Complex and Contextually Emergent' (Jacobs, 2006), wherein she describes the incredible subtleties of the therapist's 'enabling' role. In particular, while she defines therapeutic support as that which enables a client

... to do (or experience) something; ... to acquire an until-now lacking ability ... the accessibility of which has been blocked by fears; [or that] makes it possible for a client to take the respective next step that is necessary in order to acquire an until-now lacking ability [or] ... experience (italics original, p. 11),

throughout the paper Lynne increasingly emphasises support as an ability to 'recognise and act in concert with

one's coming solutions' (italics mine, p. 18). This sounds like a move towards grace to me.

A paradigm shift

Indeed, the past twenty years, particularly since the publication of seminal works including *The Healing Relationship* (Hycner and Jacobs, 1995) and *Gestalt Reconsidered* (Wheeler, 1991), have seen a paradigm shift, with an emphasis on what can be termed 'the relational turn'. Within Gestalt psychotherapy this has involved an increasing shift from interest in individual, intra-psychic figures towards structures of ground, situation/context, and the between of the dialogic relationship. I want briefly to describe this move with reference to the concept of liminal space, which I would suggest is an expansion and extension of the notion of the between to incorporate the between of the field/situation.

Epistemology of the liminal model

Tracing the development of the relational turn and paradigm shift necessarily involves an immersion, or at least plunge, into the history of phenomenology which has shaped both Gestalt psychotherapy's epistemology and praxis.

Most rudimentary pedagogical methods and tools within Gestalt theory take as a starting point the early work of Edmund Husserl and the project of phenomenology. Husserl was fascinated by what he saw as 'the gap' or 'space between' our sensory experience or perceptions and the world (Husserl, 1931). He was the last of the great Cartesian phenomenologists who believed that we could approach the 'thing in itself' by a process of phenomenological 'reductions' designed to overcome or transcend the subjectivity of our perceptual view of the world. To this end he proposed the three processes of bracketing, horizontalising, and describing what is perceived, in the belief that this reduced the 'contaminating' influence of individual subjectivity.

It was the realisation of the implicit 'errors' of this approach by his student Heidegger in his work *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1962) that brought about a holistic revolution in phenomenology, and indeed in Husserl's later work (see Bloom (2008) and Crocker (2005) for a fuller description). Heidegger realised that we can never separate ourselves from our context in which we are always and already embedded. Our perceptions can never transcend our existential immersion in this joint situation, our point of being in time: hence the notion of 'The other who is always and already there' and from whom we might seek to individuate. He defined our way of being, *Dasein*, as that for which existence is an issue, and distinguished

the transparent readiness-to-hand of our seamless, capable dealings with the world from the 'present-at-hand' objectifying of the world when we stop to think analytically. In Heideggerian terms, then, the liminal space describes the indivisibility of individual from context, despite the fact that our sense-making systems are capable of giving us a Cartesian aloofness from which we can survey our surroundings in conditions of relative security and invulnerability. The between thus becomes a seamless connection which we experience in different ways according to a multiplicity of contextual factors.

Buber (1958) took a very similar approach to human relationships and the between, contrasting the 'Ich-Du/I-Thou' style of relationship with the 'Ich-Es/I-It' style of potential objectification. It was from the intimate moments of I-Thou relationship itself that healing flowed and, in Buber's Hasidic brand of mysticism, the infinity of the between experienced in I-Thou moments was where we encountered God. In the necessary oscillation between I-It and I-Thou, and the acknowledgement that the latter state cannot be directly willed or aimed for, it is possible to glimpse the dialectic of will and grace emerging and a liminal space existent between the dialogic partners.

This fusion of perception, meaning-making, and experiencing was further developed by Gadamer in his articulation of 'philosophical hermeneutics' (Gadamer, 1976); the process by which meaning is elucidated via ongoing recursive and iterative dialogue. Again, the between of the players is a seamless, fluxing point of contact, where both intention to meet, and impact upon another, are combined in moments of contact. As words and meanings flow back and forth, communication is created rather than conveyed. What I want and intend to say is changed by the impact of hearing myself speak and your response to what I say. My will, which led me to initiate the dialogue, surrenders to the grace and intentionality of the emerging conversation.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) articulated the embodied relational qualities that are also present at these moments, by describing 'flesh' as possessing both subjective and objective realities simultaneously. He coined the term 'reversibility' to describe the phenomena whereby I can both touch and be touched at the same time and do not know whether my left hand touches my right, or my right hand the left. Yet, my mind has to approach this indivisible state, which he termed 'chiasm' (Merleau-Ponty, 1969), from one direction or the other, finding it impossible to grasp the 'And-Bothness' of the connection.

Alfred North Whitehead (1929) challenged the atomistic 'substance ontology' of traditional Cartesian science. He developed a holistic metaphysics based on relationship that integrated human awareness, was

more compatible with quantum mechanical and relativistic concepts, and which was based on process and relationship. He questioned how consciousness could arise from 'dead' material reality and his answer was a new, holistic metaphysics. 'Process relational philosophy' envisions physical matter not as isolated objects moving through space-time, but as a dynamic process of interconnected experiential events; a nexus of evolving relationships or 'moments of experience', from the between of which reality in every second unfolds in a process of 'conrescence'. The roots of our enriched human experience are founded in these moments of experience, made coherent through the organisational structure of our nervous system.

Relationally focused writers and theorists within the Gestalt community have come again and again to these newer articulations emphasising connectedness, complexity and mutuality; the more gracious aspects of change processes. In this paper, however, I want to suggest the need for an acknowledgement of both will and grace, the classic and relational schools combined. We live, change, and are changed, coherently, yet find it hard to see both our intentionality and our responsiveness simultaneously. All too frequently we attribute change to only one end of the dialectic and see processes as stemming from either our will-power or 'gracious' field conditions. In turn, this can lead to habits of being either overly agentic or excessively passive, whether we are in roles as therapists, friends, clients or lovers: it is hard to stay present to the dialectical fullness of each unfolding moment. In particular, I believe there is a need to specify the action practices and procedural competencies of non-linear change if we are to ensure inclusion of these aspects in our methodology, praxis, and pedagogy, as well as in our theory.

Gracious living: shared action practices

As stated at the outset of this paper, I believe that the early history of Gestalt psychotherapy theory favoured an agentic, will-based articulation of theory and method of praxis. What follows is my attempt to articulate the skillset and action practices required to facilitate the non-linear, seemingly effortless, magical and mysterious, change processes; the shifts that seem to just happen. These are processes I touched on in my paper 'Complexity of Ease' (Denham-Vaughan, S., 2009), where I described the great difficulty of noticing, articulating, and defining these gracious elements; the moments Jacobs (2006) described as 'one's coming solutions', and that Archie Roberts (1999) famously termed instances when the 'field talks back'.

Each of the individual processes that follow is, there-

fore, complex in its own right. Indeed, some have had whole libraries of books spent trying to define them. Sadly therefore, I will be unable to do any of them justice individually; but that is not my task.

Instead, what I am aiming to achieve here is a first pass at listing and describing a comprehensive and interconnected skillset required for facilitating non-linear change. These are practices designed to be *taught* to therapists, coaches, and organisational consultants working in a Gestalt frame. In turn, they form a skillset and ultimately a methodology for facilitating change, and in particular, for working in non-linear ways with transformational process.

I do not think we can assume that trainees in any role will simply pick up these skills via an apprenticing process and watching others at work; instead it is beholden upon those of us who occupy the role of educators and trainers to specify and clearly describe what we do. What follows is my attempt to do this, based on a self-reflexive process, personal and peer reflections, and explicit learning from some master-practitioners at work. The twelve elements that I have included appear in no particular order, but each affords support and perspective for other elements.

First, and at the heart of gracious living and Gestalt praxis, is *awareness of embodied relational 'being'*: the simple (not easy) art of staying fully present to the fact that I am existent in an embodied form. I am not describing the 'use' of awareness to identify an emerging figure, initiate an activity or energise around a need or task. Instead, I am describing a form of awareness that Yontef (2005) calls a 'self-supportive whole process' (p. 86). An act of noticing that I am here, conscious, breathing and situated; the ontic elements identified as being in time, combined with a noticing of the specific 'constellation of the whole field' (Parlett, 2005).

Second, I identify ability, afforded through my embodiment, to *resonate* with the elements in the current situation. Resonance is a term I first used in a paper written with Marie-Anne Chidiac (Chidiac and Denham-Vaughan, 2007) wherein we defined presence as 'Energetic Availability and Fluid Responsiveness'. We proposed that these qualities can be harnessed through extensive practice into an increased ability to attune or resonate with others. In particular, we described a subtle, imperceptible to-ing and fro-ing motion which can be viewed as a vibrating process, whereby one attempts to come into resonant harmony with another. Our hypothesis was that this resonant ability might help to understand the experience of being almost able to predict what will emerge next, a form of prescience, while also being hypervigilant to difference from what is anticipated. Both our phenomenal experience and some scientific arenas support the view that our resonant

ability might, at least partially, be a spontaneously occurring property of our embodied state. Recent neuroscience and the discovery of mirror neurons help provide at least a partial basis for explaining these responses (see Ramachandran, 2006, or Rizzolatti, 1996, for full discussion). It would appear that this neurological system provides a physiological explanation for 'perception action coupling', whereby we have an embodied sense of acting whether we perform an action *or* observe someone else do so. The mirror neuron system could therefore be the basis of our ability to see through other people's eyes with our own embodied mind and become very finely attuned to them.

This use of self as instrument could therefore be described as 'the intended application of self to the resonance of the environment'. This theme has recently been explored by Michael Clemmens (2010) who describes resonance as the skill of 'noticing and amplifying my sensate response to my client in the moment' (p. 7). I want to add to this an ability to resonate to the sensate atmosphere presenting in the whole situation and environment, which Ty Francis and I have referred to as 'the Subjectivity of the Situation' (Denham-Vaughan and Francis, 2008). This ability requires a sensitivity to atmosphere, lighting, smells, textures; all the constituents of environment, as well as to person.

Third is the practice of *mindfulness*, which I formulate as a combination of holistic present-centred awareness plus fully embodied engagement with the situation. Kabat-Zinn's (1995) definition of Buddhist mindfulness as 'a particular way of paying attention: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally' (p. 4), allies very closely. Yet with an emphasis on non-judgement there is, I believe, a loss of discernment vital to an ethical and gracious stance in life. As Gestalt practitioners we are constantly making numerous value-based 'judgements' concerning what to pay attention to, what to raise awareness of, which aspects of this data to convey to the other and when to pass along the information. This is a highly complex ethical task involving multiple decisions made in combination with, and cognisant of, the other action practices.

Fourth is a need both to acknowledge and *articulate* in language, all the processes taking place. I am not describing a need to speak about or convey this information verbally, but rather a conscious process of finding words to signify and hold the experience of the moment in my mind. Without this, the process remains occluded though it may be sensed or intuited. Translating experience into language allows instead for recognition of the process, combined with a vastly increased ability to create a meaningful narrative and analysis of all the factors that are presenting; the experience thus becomes *known* to me through language.

Fifth is the ability to *appraise options* for action; to weigh up, evaluate, choose, and define the potentials and possibilities emerging. This skill is key to occupying the liminal space, very analogous to steering a boat, surfing a wave, etc., in that the appraisals have to be achieved more rapidly than our rational, cognitive processes permit. I am not describing here a logical, linear weighing up of pros and cons (although some situations might call for that) but rather an embodied flow into whole situation action. This is the 'threshold' experience, when we decide whether to move forward into action or back into withdrawal. Every move needs to be made with all the skills I have already described, as well as those that are to follow; it is this process of non-habitual choosing that shapes and creates the emerging moment. Philippon (2009), describing his Aikido practice, states, 'The situation, rather than my planning, moves my body'. Yet, we must not forget that this process, gracious as it sounds, does not come without using the will to practise for many years to achieve mastery.

Sixth is an ability to maintain a simultaneous *focus* on phenomenological indicators of mobilisation or excitement; observing and attending to emotions arising as responses to the actions we take. This can be thought of as the 'hermeneutic circle' (Gadamer, 1976), in action; a recursive process of moving, changing and moving again in response to that change. The important factor is that the movements and emotions may not be in a linear direction, but may instead be the constant minute readjustments required to keep the body and embodied mind still. Without concentration, discipline and focus these micro-signals of energy rising and falling will be missed and our ability to navigate correspondingly reduced.

Seventh, and intimately associated with factor six, is a willingness explicitly, as well as implicitly, to *contain action* in response to energy changes and reactions. This requires a range of skills, from the ability to embody and model quiet stillness, through to direct instructions to refrain from movement or action until a desirable possibility emerges. This practice incorporates the discipline of what Carlos Castaneda in *The Teachings of Don Juan* (Castaneda, 1998) referred to as 'Sitting in the One Seat'; an ability to commit to inaction until desirable conditions arise in the field. Patience, surrender, attention and the skill of holding steady in the liminal space are all incorporated in this practice, which accompanies most rituals and much meditation. Western culture, however, tends to see this element as representing limbo, stuckness and an unwillingness to act or make a decision. There can therefore be pressure to take rash, premature and impetuous action that is unsupported by the field. Alternatively, substances can be employed to attain a liminoid state, where there is a

semblance of transformation, but an absence of real change. Containment of action and strong emotion can be particularly important following trauma, where life has ‘catapulted’ us across a threshold before we have had a chance to use any of our aforementioned skills. At these times, it is vital to hold and contain clients, teams, and organisations while waiting for the embodied mind to try to catch up with changed circumstances.

During this containment phase, the *eighth* factor of *experimenting* is particularly important. Experimentation has been a feature of Gestalt psychotherapy since its outset, with an emphasis on co-emergent, calibrated suggestions arising from the current dialogue: see Mackewn (1997) and Zinker (1977) for more details. My observations are, however, that the vitality, boldness and creativity associated with experimentation seem to have exited the field as the relational approach has entered. My hypothesis for this is that experimentation has, unfortunately, become synonymous with a shame-inducing process, wherein the dialogic stance and method are necessarily compromised. Experimenting can (erroneously) be equated with the therapist leading, distancing or applying techno-rational, pre-formed ‘fixes’ to what should be a co-emergent, horizontal process.

Yet experience, and the literature, tell us repeatedly that this is not necessarily so (e.g. Parlett, 2003). Indeed, all change processes involve willingness to risk stepping out into the new, and assessing the impact of this step (not leap) upon ourselves and our situation. My experience is of experimenting being an *intimate* process I co-create with a client, even when it might appear that the suggestions, ideas and suggestions for next steps come from me. To be optimal, suggestions/offers are necessarily emerging from the ground of my being with the client in the moment, and not from a pre-planned agenda that overrides our shared emergence. This is not to say that having an ‘experiment-bank’ or a loose agenda or treatment plan is always bad; rather, that accompanying the experimental actions with awareness of required supports and resources is vital. Our full attention needs to be given to every minute factor required to sustain the emerging change process. These are the details of assessing and checking environmental support and resourcing ourselves with the accompaniments we both need to sustain the change process. If I over-extend and find myself in a habitual reaction (as opposed to response) I need to pull back, regroup and rebalance; if I start to lose awareness and dissociate, I can check my resources and reassess the situation. All of this describes an emerging, ongoing process of constant experimentation and adjustment, an extension of containing, not a leap towards a goal. I am also describing a creative process that I would

generally wish to see more of within some areas of relational praxis.

The *ninth* element of praxis incorporates frequent, possibly prescribed and certainly ‘punctuating’ *reflections* on impact within situations. Classical Gestalt psychotherapy theory advocated sensation and awareness as the reference points for guiding action, frequently with a focus on what is needed from the environment in order to satisfy needs. As Staemmler (2009) points out, this all too frequently led to a predatorial attitude to the environment; stalking situations to find resources to meet my emerging needs. Possibly due to the original metaphors in Gestalt theory involving eating, chewing and swallowing (Perls, 1969), the emphasis was ingestion, taking in, getting, rather than reciprocity or generative activity. The relational turn in Gestalt and other therapies has sought to redress this balance, with significant attention being paid to processes of co-regulation and mutuality. Indeed, the dialogic practice of inclusion specifically affords opportunity for the presence of the therapist/coach/consultant to enter fully into the situation and be impacted and affected by whatever is going on. Nonetheless, at moments of change and transition, awareness of impact on others and the environment can fade into the background, so a practice of checking and regulating in concert with the environment is vital if we are to stay in liminal space. Yet again, this praxis occurs inextricably alongside the other practices with the aim of going forward together in the situation.

The *tenth* element of *increasing preparedness to act* can be formulated as a further element of resourcing and ripening, closely allied to the need for stillness and containment of action. In this process, praxis refers to increasing embodied sensitivity and an ability to sense the call to act from the field, rather than initiating and creating it. Again, this might sound a simple skill of waiting; yet in our frantically busy, anxious lives, time often feels pressurised and the need to act correspondingly urgent. Clinical and consulting experience tells me that some clients are easier ‘waiters’ than others, with those who have been traumatised by repetitive neglect and/or sudden unexpected endings often finding it particularly difficult to trust that a right time for action will emerge. There is a strong tendency to want to push the pace and set an agenda. Understanding that this practice already *has* an agenda of staying with uncertainty, tolerating anxiety and remaining open to possibility can be hard to bear. In this regard, Staemmler’s (1997) seminal paper, ‘Cultivating Uncertainty: An Attitude for Gestalt Therapists’ becomes required reading.

The *eleventh* skill is *participation*; not the skill of merely joining in or taking part, but rather as described in Zen meditative practice; one of engaging in action

To stay congruent with Gestalt psychotherapy's phenomenological roots, I would propose that rather than using the term 'habit' we might say that the skill needs to have become 'sedimented'. This term was frequently used by Merleau-Ponty who argued that for spontaneity to be effective action it must be anchored in habitual, well-practised patterns of embodied behaviour. In *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) Merleau-Ponty writes of spontaneity and sedimentation together, as the two stages of world-structure at the core of consciousness (p. 130). Thus, the present act of a body-subject is spontaneous and the past acts of the body-subject are sedimented in the present act. Indeed, he proposes that it is through this process that the body builds up a fluency of motility that facilitates the body-world relationship. Yet again, therefore, it is clear that the gracious qualities of ease and effortlessness are products of practice and mastery. In particular, an ability to commit to fully participating in an action in a spontaneous way requires a sedimented and practised skill of doing exactly that: Linehan's 'habit'.

Towards an integration of classical and relational methodology

In order to avoid the polarisation I have warned against (attempting to parse will from grace, or vice versa), I will close by attempting briefly to articulate a Gestalt psychotherapy model that combines both linear and non-linear change strategies and combines classic and relational Gestalt praxis in a new theoretical formulation.

An obvious, clear and present danger of doing this is that advocates of both schools feel misrepresented and distanced, and that neither party feels well-represented. Hopefully however, rather than polarise, we can positively learn and synthesise from the spectrum of Gestalt psychotherapy theory and praxis.

When undertaking the teaching and training work I do, it is impossible not to be moved by the range and breadth of riches that exist within our theory, praxis, and epistemology: the vital, energetic, bold, vibrant, creative, and experimental methods that sit alongside the impeccably detailed, subtle, complex, dialogic, reciprocal aspects. I find I want them all; breadth and range are two of the 'goods' of Gestalt, and I do not want to find myself, my trainees or my clients being limited to only half of the literature, or half the skillset. In any event, how would we choose? Each client, each situation, each organisation requires us to bring all that we are, everything we know and that which we have the potential to be, to the meeting in the moment. What follows is my attempt to present at least a small sense of that integration.

I have used the Gestalt change cycle as a template, and introduced a number of reformulations that I hope capture the essence of integrating both will and grace into a transformative process.

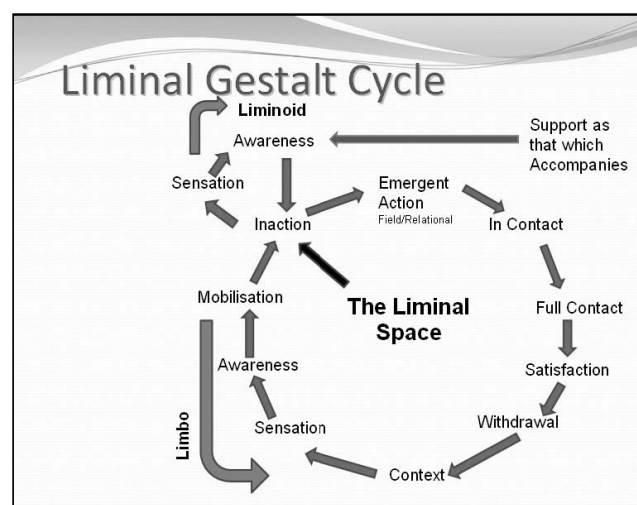


Fig. 2

First, the cycle does not start with an individual (or group/team/organisation) resting in the void. We start with the current context/situation that we are never removed from and always return to. Indeed, our situation accompanies us as certainly as we emerge from our situation.

Second, although I have included the usual three initial stages of sensation, awareness, and mobilisation, these three do not rise towards action, but rather towards a deliberate inaction/contained action where the desire to act is consciously restrained. Within the model, I acknowledge that, without sufficient support or practice, this inactivity can lead to a sense of de-energising, confusion and even failure. This can be equated to falling into a state of limbo, and clinically is likely to present as depression; the embodied system quite literally becoming de-pressed.

Using the twelve action practices previously described however, this point of conscious inactivity opens instead into a liminal space where repetitive, small, secondary cycles of sensation and awareness, using all the twelve skills for gracious living, are actively employed. So although explicit action in the world is contained, this is a time of resourcing, resonating, articulating, responding, and reflecting while waiting for the world to change. The paradoxical theory of change is particularly relevant at this point in the change process.

I equate this moment very closely to a surfer actively paddling, swimming, breathing, looking, and all the time noticing the rise and fall of waves; waiting for the wave that suits them best to come along. The outcome is an action that emerges in exquisite relationship to the field/environment and which leads to a sense of fully embodied participation in the moment.

In the model, I acknowledge the difficulty of containing action, particularly in our frenetic culture, and the possibility of excessive energy breaking out into anxiety or hyperactivity. At these points substances such as alcohol, drugs (both prescribed and non-prescribed), food, and other 'comfort tricks' such as money, self-harm, or sex can all be sought to try to reduce arousal. Alternatively, there can be a desire for such 'highs' and the resultant liminoid state.

These possibilities are, however, far less likely when the change process is facilitated and accompanied by a master (or mistress) of the twelve action practices for gracious living. The steady, embodied presence of such an individual or team, their ability to model tolerance of inaction, and continue to trust an unfolding situation, are crucial. (This forms the topic of my forthcoming further work on Presence with Marie-Anne Chidiac.)

It is therefore vital to this element of the change process that support is much more aptly described as

'that which accompanies rather than that which enables'. As Lynne Jacobs (2006) described, the emphasis has indeed shifted to one of witnessing, waiting, and tolerating uncertainty, rather than actively encouraging shift into action. In an embodied sense, more a being alongside, than backing, cheerleading, or leading the process.

Once the 'right wave' or emerging solution has arisen, however, there is a move towards a more active, experimental, agentic form of support; a lending of energy to the unfolding process as a direction for committed action emerges, and satisfaction in choosing that direction is realised. As the way forward becomes clearer, there is often an increased need for reflection and the evaluative twelfth component features strongly.

Conclusion and summary

In this paper I have attempted to articulate how in the dialectic I termed 'Will and Grace' both are present in any change process and are conjoined in the liminal space; the moment where we are on the threshold of change. I took the liberty of describing will as synonymous with a more classical form of Gestalt theory emphasising intentionality, while grace epitomised a more radically relational style focusing on impact.

In my attempts to articulate the components of the gracious end of the dialectic I described twelve action practices that I believe are essential to living and facilitating change in this way. Finally, I presented a reformulation of the cycle of experience that acknowledges emerging context, emphasises the paradoxical theory of change, acknowledges the liminal space, and redefines support as 'that which accompanies'.

Reflecting on what I have written feels like arriving at the end of a transformative process myself. This paper, and the lecture that preceded it, have been over twelve months in preparation. Each month I set myself the task of 'just noticing' a particular aspect of my Gestalt practice and then attempted to elucidate and articulate the impact of that element in my life. Once identified, I also watched for that element in the work and teaching of other practitioners. I never knew in advance what the fractal would be, and frequently got to the end of the month before being able to name it. But gradually, across a month, I became more adept at recognising, naming, and describing the elements in question. I hope that through some of the ideas put forward in this paper I may have assisted others to do the same.

Acknowledgement

Some writing is inspired by dialogue with many people, while some emerges from personal ideas. But this work

owes its origin to conversation with one central source: my husband, Jim Denham-Vaughan. I am very appreciative of Jim who introduced me to the concept of liminal space and then spent many hours discussing and working through these ideas. In so many ways they represent a shared passion and understanding; certainly one that I could not have made manifest without his help.

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