What is gestalt?

Gestalt is a German word, a noun that has no direct English equivalent with its closest translation generally agreed to be pattern, form, shape or configuration. Yet it is more than any of these descriptions. In German it relates to the overall appearance of a person, their totality, where their energy is located. As is inevitably the case with any translation something is lost in the translation, and these terms do not fully convey its meaning. They are as close as those of us without an understanding of the German language can get. Indeed, even if we had an intimate understanding of the language each of us would create a slightly different picture from the word; such is the nature of language. In that sense I begin this book with the conundrum that faces every gestalt therapist as they face fellow human beings in the therapy room. That in our individual uniqueness we can only ever get experience near to another, we can never completely and utterly comprehend the other’s experience. To gain the best understanding possible of the other we need to appreciate the way they configure themselves in relation to their environment, the patterns they paint as they relate to their world and those they meet in their world, the way they form and shape their experience. How the individual forms and then moves on from one experience to another.

Many say that the word ‘gestalt’ should be capitalized just as any other German noun. However, gestalt therapy did not arrive in the English-speaking world yesterday. It has been here since the founders published their seminal work ‘Gestalt Therapy’ in 1951. One of its roots, Gestalt psychology was in existence for fifty years prior to this. It is clear to me, as Bloom, Spagnuolo-Lobb and Staemmler assert, ‘it is no longer the proper name of a new modality. Gestalt therapy is one of many accepted approaches ... and all are common name. Gestalt therapy appropriately has earned a lower case’ (2008: 7). The German noun argument does not hold any water with me either as, ‘gestalt is as English a
word as frankfurter or sauerkraut’ (ibid). So, throughout this book gestalt will appear in lower case just as any reference to psychoanalysis, psychodynamic therapy or cognitive behaviour therapy would. Gestalt therapy has come of age.

To explain what gestalt therapy is in just a few words is a difficult task. I would summarise it as a relational therapy that synthesizes three key philosophies that have been described as the ‘pillars of gestalt’ (Yontef, 1999: 11), these being:

1. Field Theory: the person’s experience is explored in the context of their situation or field (I will use the terms situation and field interchangeably).
2. Phenomenology: the search for understanding through what is obvious and/or revealed, rather than through what is interpreted by the observer.
3. Dialogue: a specific form of contacting (not just talking) that is concerned with the between of the relationship and what emerges in that between.

In the gestalt therapist’s work these philosophies weave in and out of one another and the relational perspective is at the core of each of these three philosophies. Consequently, I see gestalt as a truly integrative psychotherapy. If any one of these ‘pillars’ is not being practised then gestalt therapy is not being practised.

Gestalt is an experiential therapy and as such experimentation is key to the approach. The mind/body split so prevalent in Western culture is actively discouraged within gestalt’s holistic view of the individual/environmental fields that are seen as co-dependent. The approach’s radical view of self as process, rather than seeing self as something belonging to the individual sets it apart from virtually all other psychotherapies. As I said, to give a concise and adequate explanation to the question ‘What is gestalt?’ is not an easy task. The nature of the theory is such that it is not open to a fixed and rigid definition. Being rooted in field theory, dialogue and phenomenology that are all concerned with individual perception, it is not too extreme to suggest that there could be as

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1 Exceptions will be where I am quoting others who capitalize ‘gestalt’.
many definitions of ‘gestalt’ as there are gestalt therapists, quite simply because we all have our unique ways of reaching out and making sense of our world.

I see gestalt therapy as a voyage of discovery. We are exploring how a person reaches out to their world, how they respond to their situation and how past and present situations impact upon their (and our) process of reaching out in the here and now. We do so whilst actively engaging in the relationship with the client as part of their situation, paying careful attention to what happens in the dynamic interchange between us. We aim to increase awareness through embracing the totality of everything the person before us is, was and can become. Gestalt is exciting, vibrant and energetic. Over the coming pages, backed by the ground of gestalt’s substantial history, this gestalt therapist will continue to give his unique view of what gestalt is. So our journey begins!