What is a gestalt?

Simply stated a gestalt is the completion of what the founders\(^2\) of the approach referred to as an *organismic* need (PHG, 1951), so named to emphasize the lived quality of the experience. A gestalt represents a whole experience that can span varying periods of time depending upon the need that is being addressed. A need to satisfy hunger may be met over a few minutes, or in the case of a gourmet meal may be lingered over, whereas a need to satisfy a 'hunger' for a fulfilling career may span many years. We human beings are inherently relational, it follows that these whole experiences are always formed in relationship with our environment. There is always, 'an interdependency of the organism and its environment' (Perls, 1947: 34). The diner and the meal inter-relate and one changes the other. When a need is met the gestalt is completed and the individual is free to move on to addressing new needs as space is created for these to surface.

Although a gestalt is a representation of a single unit of experience, I do not want to give the impression that gestalt theory suggests that we live our lives moving staccato fashion from one unit of experience to another. Gestalts are intricately woven in and out of each other. For example, as I am typing this an itch on my nose stands out and I move to satisfy that need by scratching my nose before reaching for my coffee to satisfy a need for a comforting warm drink (and caffeine). As I drink my coffee I project into the future thinking about what will follow this section of the book, before returning to the sense of my fingers to the keyboard. You will notice from this account that each gestalt is journeyed through in the present either through enactment or

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\(^2\) Fritz Perls has often been credited as being the sole founder of gestalt therapy. Although there is no doubt that he was a major contributor in founding the approach, the contributions made by his wife Laura Perls and Paul Goodman were also considerable and they are seen as co-founders.
imagination. The person’s past, their expectations, the influences that are exerted by the situation faced and the cultural ground upon which the individual stands will all shape the way the individual forms and moves from one gestalt to another.

This process of an emerging need journeying through to completion has been described in a number of stages that have been elaborated and modified over the years since the founders described their conceptualization of a gestalt as journeying through four phases which they called fore-contact, contact, final contact, post-contact (PHG, 1951) – see Point 13. Many phased maps have since been developed and diagrammatically represented in an attempt to illustrate the completion of an experience (a gestalt). Two such examples are those devised by Zinker (1977) and Clarkson (1989) that have become commonly known as the Gestalt Cycle or the Cycle of Experience – see Point 14.