Self as process: selfing

What does ‘self as process’ actually mean? Let me begin by saying what it does not mean. It does not mean that self is some kind of fixed entity that lives deep inside me.

Whereas other therapies and philosophies see self as a separate structure or existence, there is no such split in gestalt’s view of self. In gestalt we do not believe that there is a self that resides exclusively inside me, only a self that is created in the process of me making contact with the environment. We make contact with our world through our senses at what we refer to in gestalt as the contact boundary – where ‘I’ ends and ‘other’ begins. It is in this between that self forms. Our selves emerge in the act of reaching out to our world at our respective contact boundaries in the present in an on-going, ever-changing dynamic process. ‘We are the contact we make. We exist when we contact the world’ (McLeod, 1993).

To more accurately describe this dynamic process in gestalt we use the term selfing. The use of a verb rather than a noun reflects the active process of the self’s constant state of flux in relation to the environment. We are always selfing through a constant flow of creative adjustment informed by our history in response to the situation in which we stand at this moment in time. Our responses constantly change in relation to the situations we meet. If we accept this hypothesis it makes nonsense of any fixed method of diagnosis or categorization. I recall ending a paper covering my work with a ‘narcissistic’ client with what felt like a daring statement, ‘during this work I have learnt there is no such thing as a narcissist.’ My client’s history had been peppered with incidents where she had been objectified. When using descriptors we need to be sensitive to how the use of nouns will fix the individual in time and space, to do so does not fit with a gestalt philosophy. So, there can indeed be no such thing as a narcissist if we are constantly selfing, only people who behave narcissistically at certain times in relation to their situation.
As self and other are so inextricably connected, one cannot exist without the other. Hycner (1989: 45) suggests that rather than speaking of existence it would be more accurate to speak of 'inter-existence,' for we are all dependent upon our relationships with others to gain any sense of self. Hycner goes on to say that, 'There are as many “selves” as there are relationships we are in' (ibid). There are as many different ways of being as there are different relational situations. For example, I have a friend and colleague whom I meet in a professional setting but also in a social setting, our relationship has marked differences in the two settings. We are essentially the same people but the situation exerts a radically different influence upon us and we constellate ourselves in relation to this situation differently. As no two situations are ever the same our relationship is constantly changing. I would also like to clarify this term ‘relationship.’ Usually when we say ‘relationship’ we think of people, but let’s think a little wider to include things, interests, actions and our changing relationships with these areas. I used to run regularly and to say, ‘I enjoy running’ would have been accurate most of the time. When I developed arthritis that changed markedly. Even prior to the development of my physical problem my relationship with running was in constant flux sometimes in response to an obvious reason, a slight muscle strain or having to face bad weather, and at other times for no apparent reason other than being in process with my environment.

Within gestalt some differing views on self have been expressed. Erving and Miriam Polster (1973) discussed a concept of self that involved ‘I boundaries’, which I see as a movement away from self as process and towards a more individualistic view of self. This was furthered in Erving Polsters’ book, A Population of Selves (1995). These views do not fit with the wider held belief in gestalt that self forms in ‘the process of contacting the actual transient present’ (Wolfert, 2000: 77). As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, ‘You can never step into the same river twice’ and ‘nothing endures but change’. One of the most important pieces of facilitation that a gestalt therapist can achieve is to collaborate in restoring healthy spontaneity in the self-function where that spontaneity has been disrupted or interrupted and is out of step with the client’s situation.