Dimensions of contact

Although the moderations to contact can be a useful map when considering how we creatively adjust to our situation, they do offer only one pole of a continuum. When considering these processes in a unilateral manner there is a tendency to view them in a predominantly negative light, as something to overcome, rather than seeing them as a skill that has been developed and can still be of considerable use today depending on our situation. Some of these processes rest less easily upon the ground of an individualistic culture than others. This is the case with confluence and introjection both of which, broadly speaking, are about a loosening of our boundaries rather than a rigidifying or distancing which may be more acceptable in a culture that values individualism rather than communality. Consequently, I agree with Erving Polster:

Yet, though Gestalt therapy theory broadly interpreted, is neutral on the health and unhealth of introjection and confluence, they have been almost invariably spoken of in pejorative terms.

(E. Polster, 1993: 42)

The argument for overcoming so-called interruptions could be extended to the creative adjustments that we may consider to be culture-systonic as well as the above culture-dystonic processes if we view these processes as obstacles to overcome in a relentless march towards awareness rather than as serving a valuable function. The danger of such an attitude is that we behave as disconnected islands separate from our situation and each other. In contemporary gestalt we believe that self-awareness develops between our contact boundaries not behind them.

The following model based on the work of MacKewn (1997) better illustrates the need to develop a range of responses. The whole situation at the time will dictate where on the following continuaums is healthy or unhealthy, safe or unsafe. The terms on
the left and right of each continuum represent the polarities of that particular dimension of being; the term in the centre represents a marker for the middle ground.

Desensitization .......... Sensitivity .......... Allergic Reaction /Hyper-sensitivity
Deflection ............ Staying with .......... Being Mesmerized
Introjection .......... Questioning, assimilating .......... Refusal to Accommodate
Retrojection .......... Expression .......... Unbridled Expression /Explosion
Projection ............ Owning ............... Own Everything /Literalness
Confluence ............ Differentiation .......... Isolation
Egotism ................. Spontaneity .......... Lack of all field constraints

When inviting individuals to experiment with different ways of being the gestalt therapist needs to be mindful that even the most apparently 'pathological' forms of creative adjustment were, and probably still are, supports. Consequently, when these beliefs about ourselves are challenged, the ground of our experience can shake with the individual experiencing a psychological earthquake if the challenge is over-pitched. One of the tasks for the gestalt therapist is to create a safe emergency where the client can experiment with different ways of being with sufficient holding. To do so, the ground of the therapeutic relationship needs to have been developed. Such experimentation will involve the client extending the above continua but there will be times when it will also involve the therapist challenging their own 'comfort zones'. Both client and therapist need to lean into their growing edges. Within such a model healthy functioning is defined as an ability to flexibly move along the above continuums in a way that is congruent for the person in relation to their situation. The greater our capacity to extend our ability to move along these continua with awareness, the healthier our relationship with our world becomes.