Attending to the bodily ‘felt sense’

Gestalt therapy is a body-oriented therapy; with its philosophy of holism and phenomenology it cannot be anything else, for when we refer to the term ‘body’ or ‘bodywork’ we refer to a unitary being as part of a unified field. In gestalt and phenomenology we use the terms the living or lived body. This may sound strange at first but the reason these terms are used is to emphasize that we work with a body of experience, a body that carries with it a history and is inseparable from the matrix of relationships it is embedded in. The gestalt therapist tries to make contact with the actual living of the client in the here and now, to increase awareness of, and experiment with, the person’s rhythms and patterns of living (PHG, 1951). These patterns of contact and withdrawal manifest in the client’s bodily movements, both subtle and obvious, and in their manifestation reflect the client’s bodily felt sense – a felt sense that may not necessarily be in conscious awareness. As gestalt therapists we do not need to seek to uncover what is underneath a bodily felt sense, a movement or a gesture but work with it. A gesture that appears to hit out or reach out speaks to me but I do not look for anything underneath it but work with the presenting phenomena, allowing space for any awareness of meaning to emerge in the client. In the moment, ‘Things are entirely what they appear to be and behind them . . . there is nothing’ (Sartre, 1948).

It is often useful for the client to move in order to increase their awareness of their environment and their body in relation to their environment. Indeed, physical movement often brings about psychological movement, illustrating the unitary nature of our being. A person’s perception of their body and of objects in contact with the body is vague when there is no movement (Goldstein, 1939).

We gain a bodily felt sense through lived experience rather than ‘talking about’ an experience. When I ‘talk about’ an experience I am one step removed from that experience – I am thinking about it, rather than living it – as such the way in which this ‘talked

Experiential exercise

Walk around the room slowly. Notice your way you distribute your weight, and what areas are you less groups from your feet and even make statements from relation to your felt sense – what information your lived
about' experience touches or affects me is diluted. It is the difference between talking about being held by your partner and allowing yourself to truly be held by your partner. Hence, in gestalt therapy we seek to increase the client's bodily felt sense by encouraging immediate relating, heightening awareness of contact functions and modelling an embodied way of being, for when we habitually place our experience at a disembodied distance we diminish ourselves. Of course, this is not a unilaterally negative movement; as ever, behaviour is field contextual. If I am encountering a traumatic situation, an ability to move away from my bodily felt sense will probably be what my situation calls for and this is a valuable ability. However, this is also what our Western culture usually calls for. Consequently, I believe that for most of us our growing edge in relation to a disembodiment—embodiment awareness continuum is in a movement towards the embodiment end of that continuum through heightening our awareness of our bodily felt sense.

**Experiential exercise**
*Walk around the room slowly paying attention to the way in which you distribute your weight. What areas of your body hold tension and what areas are you less aware of? Slowly move through muscle groups from your feet and calves up to your forehead. You could even make statements from these different areas of your body in relation to your felt sense – in the first person of course! Just notice what information your lived body holds.*