Confluence

In geography confluence describes the point where two rivers merge into one. In gestalt it carries a similar meaning – a merging or dissolving of the contact boundary that leads to a lack of differentiation from the other. Such a lack of differentiation can be a beautiful and life-enriching experience such as when confluent moments are enjoyed merging when making love, the sense of losing oneself in a group or crowd singing as one, merging with your environment when completing a creative piece of work or feeling at one with whatever you believe in spiritually. Indeed, as therapists we need an ability to move in and out of confluent moments to understand, empathize and practise inclusion with our clients. A wonderful example of an experience of confluence is when we fall in love, we ‘fall’ from ourselves into the other. Whilst on the subject of wonderful examples of ‘positive’ confluence, let me offer another that I am less qualified to testify on than many women, that of the confluence present in the bonding process with a newborn child.

In the West the vast majority of us live in something approaching a confluent-phobic culture. Confluence will be seen in a radically different way within a communal culture. Standing on our individualistic ground, we separate rather than join. Consequently, and broadly speaking, I believe that confluence has received something of a bad press in the gestalt literature. Despite the fact that the notional line that it is neither positive nor negative is stated, what follows rarely backs this up. However, this is not to deny that a confluent way of being can be an unhealthy way of being.

The confluent person leans on the other as difference is denied; if the other person leaves that relationship they collapse. Should both partners enter a ‘contract of confluence’ their attitudes, beliefs and feelings do not differ, between them they may behave as if they were one person (Clarkson, 1989: 55). They may begin to dress in similar ways and even look similar. Confluence is
marked by the proverbial 'we', with any conflict that threatens to disrupt the confluent system being avoided. Such systems are by no means restricted to couples but can occur in any relationship between individuals or groups or organizations including therapist and client. Where such confluence is present, even a relatively mild challenge is likely to threaten the existence of those involved. With a complete lack of friction there is a lack of vibrant contact in this low-energy way of being. The confluent person in 'going with the flow' may not end up where they truly would like to be, but they will expend very little energy in getting there.

A person who seeks a dysfunctional closeness in a relationship demonstrates an unwillingness to discover his or her own resources; a person who invests in confluence's polar opposite, isolation, demonstrates an unwillingness to engage in healthy dependence; a person who has the ability to flow with fluidity along a continuum between these polarities in relation to the changing situations they encounter demonstrates an ability to live healthily. This view stands in contrast to the notion put forward by Fritz Perls when he defined health as the ability to move from environmental support to self-support.

In therapy confluence can be difficult to break. The therapist needs to be aware of their reactions to this presentation. With the low-energy field created, one can become confluent with the confluence! Observing and stating differences, monitoring energy levels, saying what you see, allowing yourself to work spontaneously are all possible ways of increasing the level of contact that will act as an antidote to confluence. I also find it of great benefit to gain the story of how this way of being developed and in doing so gather a picture of what other processes support this style of moderating contact. After all, most clients that walk through our door may want change, but ultimately want to be understood.