In May 1997 I gave the keynote address for the 20th Anniversary Long Island (N.Y.) Gestalt Therapy Center Conference at Hofstra University.

Near the end of that presentation I told the audience, as an aside, that what follows is the ten percent that I wanted them to take home with them and remember (research says that people remember only ten percent from lecture presentations). The relevance of these excerpts from the last part of the keynote address to the events of September 11, 2001 and subsequently is, hopefully, self-evident.

We are not merely a-contextual individuals. We can only exist within, and as part of, the larger field. If we do not pay any attention to that larger field of ‘otherness’, we are going to be in trouble. And yes, ‘we’ are in trouble.

Most of us know that as soon as we separate an ‘us’ from a ‘them’, we are building a ground where horrendous things can happen. An ‘us’ is created with perhaps an over identification of similarities with some people and a narrow focusing on differences attributed to others who then become ‘them’. Similarities are usually highly valued and differences are frequently seen as negative. ‘Us’ and ‘them’ is not a dichotomy but rather a continuum of progressive concentric circles beginning with:

‘me’ (followed by)
‘me and you’,
‘family’,
‘friends’,
‘acquaintances’ (to the ever larger concentric circles, continuing with)
‘people I don’t know who “are similar to me”’,
‘who are different from me,’
and then ‘people I don’t even know that exist in some other part of the planet’.

As we move down the continuum, our shared human relatedness fades. At one of these concentric circles – generally where we perceive less and less similarity between ourselves and others on dimensions we deem to be important – we become ‘us’ and people outside the circle become ‘other’ or ‘them’.

At first, ‘other’ is either neutral (which is the beginning of trouble since we are no longer connected as full human beings), or ‘other’ becomes negative (which is a guarantee of trouble). This trouble is usually initially for the ‘other’, and inevitably, it turns out to be trouble for ‘us’ too. (And we need to remember that each and every one of ‘us’ is somebody else’s ‘other’.)

When the ‘other’ is disconnected and exists in the background (as neutral or negative), ‘other’ essentially becomes ‘dehumanise’. Unfortunately, it then seems that it does not make too much difference what effect my actions have on this distant (and dissimilar to me) ‘other’. (Of course, from ‘their’ point of view, ‘they’ are fully human and ‘we’ are not. Again, ‘we’ are their ‘other’.)

The Nazis had a very clear view of ‘otherness’. In their system, Gypsies, Jews, homosexuals, non-Aryans, political enemies, etc., were all ‘other’. It was justifiable and rational (within their phenomenological organisation) to obliterate those people for the ‘betterment’ of the world, meaning the betterment for ‘them’ because ‘they’ were the world and ‘non-them’ were only ‘other’. ‘Other’ could then be maltreated and/or annihilated. Ironically, throughout history, such annihilation is often pursued with ‘moral’ authority – e.g. the crusades, the inquisition, the holocaust, ethnic cleansing, etc.

Most of us can see the process when we are talking about the Nazis and the Holocaust. We have a little more difficulty when we start seeing it springing up all over the world – sometimes subtle and sometimes not. The most horrendous reality to me is that it looks like most, if not all people, are capable of doing these kinds of things to other people once they have dehumanised the ‘other’: in Rwanda, the Tutsi and the Hutu; in the Middle East, the Israelis and the Palestinians; in central Asia, the Taliban to other Afghans; in the Balkans, the Serbs and Croats; in America, the whites and the African and Native Americans; in Asia, the Japanese in China and Korea (in WWII); and both the North and South Vietnamese and the Cambodian killing fields, to note a few.

I am talking about the unspeakable things people do to each ‘other’ when ‘other’ is far enough removed and disconnected from ‘us’. ‘Other’ does not have the same humanness and the same human qualities as ‘we’ do.

Righteousness

What is sobering and frightening to me is that our own organised religions, unwittingly (I think and hope) maintain, support and contribute to the creation of this view of ‘otherness’. Practically every organised religion I know (except perhaps, some forms of Buddhism and

Robert W. Resnick
Reflection On The Shoah

much of Kung’s point of view:

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silent was a relatively minor part of the church’s
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(from Tubingen University) has been officially silenced
by me’ (John, 14:6). If you do not come through me
and the truth, and the life. No man cometh to the Father,

Gentile) too are clearly negative. Frightening.
As far as I know, there is not a nice word in Yiddish for
word ‘Gentile’ is in English... Goy is just not a nice word.
As far as I know, there is not a nice word in Yiddish for
non-Jew. Shicksa (female Gentile) and Shagetz (male
Gentile) too are clearly negative. Frightening.

Christianity is no better in its collective righteousness.

There is only one way. ‘Jesus saith to him: I am the way,
and the truth, and the life. No man cometh to the Father,
but by me’ (John, 14:6). If you do not come through me
(Jesus Christ), you cannot be saved – or even be OK.

Hans Kung, a Swiss Catholic priest and theologian
(from Tubingen University) has been officially silenced
by the church. After reading the second Vatican Council
documents, Kung commented that the Catholic church’s
position of standing by during the Holocaust and being
silent was a relatively minor part of the church’s
contribution. Kung said, ‘It was no longer possible to say
that the Nazis were responsible without saying the church
is co-responsible. Nazi anti-Semitism would have been
impossible without 2,000 years of Christian anti-Judaism.’
It was not racial, it was religious. (Less than a year after
this keynote address was given in 1997, Pope John Paul II
and the Vatican have essentially and quietly confirmed
much of Kung’s point of view: We Remember: A
Reflection On The Shoah, March, 1998’.)

Kung is not holding the Catholic church or Christianity
responsible for the Holocaust. He is saying that the 2,000
years of anti-Judaism by the Catholic church and the
Christian world contributed to providing the fertile and
supportive ground for the Nazi philosophy to take hold
and grow. The church’s anti-Judaism would not have been
likely without the righteousness that ‘we are the only
way’. The Christian view, that we are ‘the way’ and ‘the
only way’, supported demoting the ‘otherness’ of the
Jews (as well as other non-Christians) as much as the
centuries of explicit anti-Judaism.

There is only one true God and one true set of beliefs
and each religion is convinced that it has captured the real
thing and that all ‘others’ are pretenders. Monumental
arrogance.

Although Judaism and Christianity were given as
examples in this keynote address, clearly Islam and the
the teachings of the Koran also hold these same views very
emptatically and explicitly. Muslims also believe and
profess that they have the reality and only Allah is God.
The fanatic extreme is exemplified by the righteous
Taliban of Afghanistan, but the core of righteousness is
throughout the mainstream of Islam, Judaism and
Christianity. ‘Too often, monotheists confuse one God
with one way’ (Halevi, Yoss, L.A. Times, September 27,
2001).

As pointed out to me (by the editor of this journal), I too
am not immune from the trap of getting locked into the
‘us’ and ‘them’ syndrome when I talk about, for example,
religions. I too am of the field.

My attempt is to allow for differential reactions –
including criticisms – to ideas, beliefs, concepts, values,
and ideologies without tying them to all people in a group
and without reducing those that hold these ‘other’ views
to a ‘less than’ position. My disagreement is with the
ideas and not with those who hold the ideas – not with
any particular religion, institution, colour, race, ethnicity,
culture, etc. Furthermore, while I do not diminish those
people who do hold the religious views I have spoken
about, I do abhor these views and their impact on our
world – regardless of who holds them. It would be unreal
and even foolish to pretend that differences in points of
view do not include both negative and positive biases.

Polarities

The dilemma is clear: how can we hold different points
of view – even with a negative valence towards others’
points of view – without becoming righteous, demeaning
and dismissive of those that hold the other points of view?
How do I remain respectful (acknowledge the existence
thereof) and hold both ends of polarities without
refracting the world into dichotomous black and white,
right and wrong, good and bad, more and less than?
Though not an easy question it is surely worth the
struggle.

I ended my keynote address as follows.

I believe Gestalt therapy, relatively unique among
theories of psychotherapy, brings an interpersonal frame
to the social sciences that offers a very personal (phenomenological), very interpersonal (dialogic), and very social and political (field theoretical) worldview. Other disciplines have for some time acknowledged those processes in other contexts – biology, geology, physics and the development of living systems. Ideas pioneered by Gestalt psychology in the 1920s have been reiterated from different kinds of scientific inquiry and research and echo the importance of embracing these concepts for survival of the species and the planet.

Gestalt therapy is both very traditional and very radical. Our theory and practice provide a crucible for hope. The organismic/environmental field is one. We may be a hope for an integrative psychotherapy and a hope for of all of us on this planet.

As this was a keynote address for the twentieth anniversary of a Gestalt therapy organisation, I, of course, talked about Gestalt therapy’s relevance and potential contribution to these issues – especially the ideas of boundaries, context, and field theory. By doing this I did not mean to imply that Gestalt therapy is the only therapy relevant to these issue(s), but rather that the relevance of Gestalt therapy is both extremely potent and very precious to me personally. Of course, there are other therapies that are concerned and equipped to deal with these same issues. Furthermore, there are certainly other disciplines and domains (e.g. political science, chaos theory, complexity theory, philosophy, ethics, etc.) and not just therapy that have much to contribute to an understanding of these issues.

Epilogue: After September 11, 2001

Until we realise that the ‘other’ is ‘us’ and ‘we’ are the ‘other’, ‘we’ will continue to be righteous, to dehumanise, to exploit and to plunder. This in turn leads to responses (including terrorism) of those who are real or allegedly mistreated, humiliated and impotent. Terrorists dehumanise and demonise their real or alleged oppressors who dehumanised them and the cycle goes on. If we do not deal with each other respectfully at all of these systemic field levels of organisation and instead stay with our own individual psyche or family, group, clan, nation, religion, ideology, etc., then we are really in danger of causing our own destruction. Dealing with difference is secondary to our differences in dealing. How we regard, approach and deal with people who hold different views is far more important than the differences in the views being held.

Dismantling the terrorists may need to be our first priority, but if we only do this without also seriously attending to the ground that produces such impotent rage, extremism and terrorism, we are doomed to cyclical repetitions. Nation building, globalisation, oil, poverty, money, oppression, spheres of influence, stationing troops, etc., are probably some of the issues that need to be addressed.

While the terrorist acts are unconscionable and unforgivable, and although the U.S. may not have ‘caused’ these acts, we are not without our contributions to creating the ground from which they sprang. The U.S. is an important part of the field in central Asia, the Middle East and elsewhere. To deny this would be as much folly as ignoring or excusing what the terrorists have done based on some of the larger field issues.

Father Daniel Berrigan, a Jesuit priest, pointed out ‘the American idea that the evil kingdom is always somewhere out there and the virtuous kingdom is always somewhere within our borders’ (L.A. Times, September 28, 2001). Father Berrigan’s statement needs to be painted with a far broader brush and needs to go beyond the borders of America – adding Jewish, Christian, Muslim and other major religions to his words. As long as all sides insist that God and righteousness (freedom, dignity, respect, etc.) are on ‘their’ side alone (and not the ‘other’) the outcome is clear, dismal, and lethal.

Notes

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