

# Jim Robinson 2010

## An exploration of the spiritual perspectives in Gestalt Therapy

### Introduction

This essay is an attempt to understand what 'spiritual' means for Gestalt psychotherapy, and what the implications are from this understanding. I will try to do this by firstly reviewing the Gestalt literature on the spiritual, looking at the range and scope of the spiritual experiences, and understanding that are described. To support and ground this exploration in the wider spiritual context I will relate this to some traditional and modern exponents of the spiritual approach.

For the review, I will introduce the Gestalt writers under the headings of the spiritual traditions they have used to support their understanding, and in a loose chronology of their writings. These writers describe a range of experience which they refer to as 'spiritual', this includes; awareness, presence, being, "aha moments", "I-Thou" dialogic encounter, being a witness, integration, "full-contact", humility, acceptance, openness, "creative indifference", "stepping out of the way", love, connectedness, truth, the divine, wholeness, consciousness, freedom, "the fertile void".

I will look at how these experiences seem to have a structure which reflects the structure of the self and how, in turn, the self exists both as a here and now process as well as a developmental one, over time. Both are relevant to seeing how spiritual experience is connected to 'contact', integration and repair of the self, with its integration of head, heart and body. I then look at some of the problems that occur when we attempt to 'bypass' the hard work of 'ego repair' through spiritual identification.

I then attempt to explore what all this means, to look at how meaning emerges from our needs and how the aims and purpose Gestalt and the spiritual relate to each other. How the paradoxes around of choice and the differences between the here and now and developmental perspectives relate to the issues around support and challenge, that we face as therapists.

Wolfert (2001) refers to Huxley's (1946) "Perennial Philosophy" in which he shows how all the established religions have a similar inner, esoteric meaning that is

"... based on transcendence and unity. At certain moments, the time-and-space of ordinary reality is transcended and the unity of the spiritual ground emerges" (Wolfert 2001)

James (1902) emphasised how the spiritual is the personal subjective experience, the phenomenological dimension of religion. He concludes, as Huxley does, that spiritual experience, across many different traditions and cultures, shares much in common.

In the last decade, spiritual writers such as, Wilber (2001 & 2006), Tolle (1999 & 2005) Kornfield (2000), Gangaji (2005), amongst others, have also emphasized these points. As Tolle says, "religion is not the truth but a story woven around the truth."(2005 p.xii)

These recent spiritual writers discuss how the 'stories' sometimes obscure the experiential 'truth' altogether and how the differences between the stories can seem irreconcilable. But I think they are again showing, like James (1902) and Huxley (1946), the convergence at the

heart of spiritual experience. As are, I think, the Gestalt writers above, who are combining an emphasis on direct experience, awareness, dialogue and holism. So I hope to show something of how they are all moving towards a new synergy which contributes to the expanding understanding of psychotherapy's relationship to spirituality.

I am excited by the possibilities and hope that I sense can emerge from this new understanding, I think that Gestalt psychotherapy and many spiritual approaches are inherently optimistic. But first ...

## The difficulties of writing about the spiritual

Ingersoll (2005) discusses the problems that he and many writers have in defining spirituality, especially with the "yang" "objectifying language" of an academic essay. That it is by its nature un-definable, being an experience "which transcends words" (p.135). However this is true to an extent of all experience and it is in the search for clarity, rather than monism, that I am attempting this essay.

Sharp (2006) argues that the postmodern task (he quotes Derrida, Foucault, Habermas, Bevir amongst others) of understanding the relativity of meaning, language and experience and its social construction has been a necessary one. But how they have, in exposing "the historically contingent nature of epistemology" (p.77), thrown the 'baby' of (Husserl's) phenomenological direct experience out with the 'bathwater' of preconception and prejudice. Wheeler (2006), Evans (2007) and Wilber (2006) all strongly emphasise this point.

PHG expressed it like this, in 1951,

"But if the criteria of correct language are so chosen that the feelingful and creative aspects of speech do not lend to the "meaning", and are "merely subjective", then no such ethics is possible in principle, for no evaluation invites assent on logical grounds. On the other hand, if it is once understood, as should be obvious, that feelings are not isolated impulses but structured evidence of reality, namely of the interaction of the organism / environment field, for which there is no other direct evidence except feeling;" (1994 p.111)

Sharp (2006) suggests that being close to direct experience is a hallmark of spiritual experience, which corresponds to Naranjo's (1995) assertion that

"... awareness is transpersonal. Or to use the earlier term spiritual" (p.185).

Sharp, in discussing the difference between perceptual and conceptual experience and the difficulty in writing and talking about the spiritual, says,

"... the fact that once the perceptual is reconstituted as conceptual by its articulation, the possibility of a one-to-one correspondence with the experience itself is lost." (2006 p.77)

In looking at Husserl's phenomenological method, Sharp (2006) argues that Husserl's idea of the "eidetic level of perception" (p.74) is the direct perception he is talking about. He calls this "holotropic (moving towards wholeness) consciousness", "a state of consciousness which ... (is) mystical; a moment of awareness that is felt as a profound sense of totality and connectedness."(p.68)

Ingersoll (2005) defers to Wilber's (2006) resolution to the problem of how spiritual experience is so hard to communicate and verify. Wilber argues that spiritual experience is confirmed through the process of "communal confirmation", i.e. others (including across cultures) have the same or similar experiences. He also argues that it is scientific, experimental and experiential, in that, if anyone deeply explores the territory they will have experiences that relate to those that spiritual writers have been describing for millennia.

Naranjo (1993) says,

“Spirituality is not a matter of ideology, however, and the transpersonal nature of an approach is a fact that overrides statements about it.” (p.187)

It is this “transpersonal” quality that I think helps define the spiritual, it is about our experience of connecting to something larger than our selves.

Crocker (2001) discusses how there are two “overarching methods” in Gestalt; phenomenology (“which is fundamental”) and dialogue. She looks at how the phenomenological method can allow the client to open up to the mystery that being a human being is.

“...spirituality is our capacity to interact with a significant mystery” which “can be known only by its effects”

So, what is the spiritual, what are the phenomena?

## The Spiritual perspectives in Gestalt

### Taoism

According to the Tao Te Ching (Lao Tsu 6<sup>th</sup> Century B.C., trans Feng & English 1973), “The Tao that can be named is not the eternal Tao” (No. 1) it is the emptiness before form, it is “an empty vessel; it is used, but never filled.” (No. 4) In modern cosmology it is the nothingness before the ‘big bang’, the “unfathomable source of ten thousand things!” (No. 4) It is the “fertile void” which holds the unity and resolution of the opposites and paradoxes of the manifest world.

The closest that PHG (1994) comes to talking about the spiritual is in its references to the Tao.

“In ideal circumstances the self does not have much personality. It is the sage of Tao that is “like water”, ... it sees it(self) again as part of a vast field.” (p.206 my brackets).

And in talking about the resolution to human suffering PHG say,

“By finally “standing out of the way”, to quote the great formula of the Tao. ... into the “fertile void” thus formed, the solution comes flooding.” (p.138)

In PHG (1994) “standing out of the way” is associated with what they call “middle mode”, spontaneous living, where “deliberateness, factuality, non-commitment, and excessive responsibility” (p.82) is replaced by “spontaneity, imagination, earnestness and playfulness, and direct expression of feeling” (ibid) According to PHG (1994) this difference is between the personality with its relative freedom of knowledge and choice, and that of “middle mode spontaneity” in where the self is taken “beyond oneself” (p.161), in contact, into the unknown creativity of the ‘fertile void’ of the here and now.

Wolfert (2001) said,

“As in Taoist teachings, people can thus enter the “fertile void,” the creativity of the self in which all exists in a ceaseless motion of formless form.”

PHG also speak about Friedlander’s “creative indifference”, or “zero point” which Wulf (1996) describes as,

“... the split that man creates in the world through his consciousness, which he experiences as inevitable and painful, i.e., the separation between me and the world, between subject and object, is merely an illusion. This can only be abolished by understanding the world from a zero point, the no-thing of the world, the absolute, the creator, the origin.”

This conveys the ‘non-duality’ at the heart of Taoism. (Lao Tsu, 1973)

The Taoist perspective is also a strong part of Barber's (2006) "Holistic Inquiry" approach, "Taoism extends and moves Gestalt notions of 'field', 'interrelatedness' and the 'fertile void', into transpersonal territory. It also cautions us to consider the 'unknown' and 'unknowable', and to be alive to metaphor and paradox, while raising our awareness to a kind of knowing which extends beyond the intellect and our senses" (p.16)

## Zen

The process of Satori in Zen is seen as a sudden profound 'aha' understanding into the nature of 'reality'. Suzuki (1949/1973) describes many Zen stories of 'masters' frustrating or challenging their disciples into this awakening. He goes on to say,

"The ultimate standpoint of Zen, therefore, is that we have been led astray through ignorance to find a split in our being, that there was from the very beginning no need to struggle between the infinite and finite, that the peace we are seeking so eagerly after, has been there all the time." (p.24)

Perls' (1975) emphasis in using Zen was more focused on what he was concerned for people to 'awaken' from,

"... the aim is called enlightenment or Satori. It means the waking up from the trance of Maya, of the unreality of our thinking. We are not generally aware of living completely and eternally in a trance, mostly in a verbal trance, in prejudices, inhibitions and so on. When we wake up from this trance, we call this in therapy the little awakening, a mini-satori. The great Satori, the final waking up, the final enlightenment, is rare." (p.180)

There is much in PHG (1994) about how we exist in this "trance", perpetually in a state of "chronic low-grade emergency" (p.40), restricting our awareness, distracted in "hyperactivity" with bodies full of tension and out of touch with our needs. How we have lost the sense of "the body-as-part-of-the-self" and how our 'fight or flight' responses are permanently engaged without resolution. (p.41)

"To sum up, we have here the typical picture of neurosis: under-aware proprioception and finally perception, and hypertonia of deliberateness and muscularity." (1994 p.41)

PHG (1994) discuss how our "creative adjustments" to a hostile environment involves us in splitting and repressing and desensitising ourselves, the more "neurotic" we are the more we avoid contact. They go on to say that there is an important difference between being neurotic and being 'normal', but how,

"The normal person either keeps himself unaware of his raging war ... keeps it dormant ... or he is aware of it and has concluded an uneasy truce ... In the neurotic person, the conflicts rage to the point of exhaustion" (p.87)

Perls (1976) later says,

"Modern Man lives in a state of low-grade vitality. Though generally he does not suffer deeply, he also knows little of true creative living. Instead of it, he has become an anxious automaton." (p.xi)

A client of Philippon's (2001) writes about her experience,

"At this time of writing I am no longer a robot who responds automatically to every situation she encounters." (p.235)

This expresses the "automaton" like trance of neurosis well.

Perls' (1975, 1992) aim and approach was to frustrate and challenge his clients around their compulsive manipulation of the environment for support. Through this he would hopefully lead them towards an impasse, with the possibility of exploding through their neurotic trance into an 'aha' moment or 'satori'. In that they could own their underlying feelings, their splits were integrated and fantasy replaced by the reality of 'what is', here and now. (1992 p.59-60)

Watts (1969) describes his understanding of the deeper 'reality' that Zen is pointing to; how the universe is comprised of opposites which dialectically define each other and how it is possible to experience this unity through expanding our awareness to include our embodied consciousness itself. How, through this we can touch the void, or emptiness, where duality is reconciled. Here we are not isolated separate selves and there is the freedom that comes with letting go of the ego,

"... it is at once exhilarating and a little disconcerting. It is like the moment when you first got the knack of swimming or riding a bicycle. There is the feeling that you are not doing it yourself, but that it is something happening on its own ... you realise that you are both the leaf and the wind. ... Your body is no longer a corpse which the ego has to animate and lug around. There is a feeling of the ground holding you up ... Air breathes itself in and out of your lungs... All space becomes your mind. Time carries you along like a river, but never flows out of the present."(p.113)

## Buddhism

Wolfert (2000) discusses the relationship between Gestalt psychotherapy and Buddhism in some detail. She first articulates the view of the self that emerges from PHG very clearly; how the self is the product of contact in the 'organism / environmental field', a "contactful field effect that produces us in the moment." (p.77) How, "selfing is a dynamic activity" (p.77) strong at times of action, weaker at rest, it is not an entity in itself.

"There "is no 'self-rock' to stand on in Gestalt therapy theory, much less to hide behind." (p.77)

She then compares this with the Buddhist view that the self is an illusion, a "false belief", and how all desires and reactions in life are illusory expressions of the sense of a separate self. Behind this illusion of separateness is the "pregnant void", Nirvana, where everything is connected and interdependent, as in the Tao.

This difference is further explored in how, for Gestalt therapy, "wanting" is a legitimate expression of the organism; the task is to allow the free flow of 'figure formation and destruction' (PHG 1994). But, Wolfert (2000) says,

"Buddhism offers a more radical approach: a deconstruction of all aspects of the field, even the individualistic wanting that Gestalt therapy maintains." (p.83)

Wolfert describes how in Buddhism the aim is to de-construct all wanting and all "self-views" that are expressions of this wanting, until ultimately even our "I AM" (p.82) is let go of so that there is no self left.

Wolfert (2000) reconciles Gestalt and Buddhism through suggesting that it is in "final-contact" and "post-contact" where Gestalt, "contains the seeds of spiritual awakening" (p.82)

"I would like to propose *being* for the self as the final, fully-lived stage of contact. *Being* signifies dwelling in moments of unity, where the splits of mind, body and the external world are healed, and reality is given in the integration of awareness, motor response and feeling." (p.82)

She says further on

"... the more we extend full contact, the emptier the space and the longer the time between contact sequences, the more totally we are suspended in the fertile void"(p.84)

Kolodny (2004) describes his first experience of an "altered state" of "sustained presence" in a "T-group". He explores how Gestalt's focus on here and now, being with our experience, is very close to the Buddhist practice of staying with 'what is' in meditation, including accepting whatever suffering is there. He describes how his experiences of different levels of consciousness are well understood in Buddhism and how,

"... the ultimate realisations of sustained presence of mind is that the practitioner's sense of a separate self falls away, replaced by the sense of being one with the experience." (p.96)

In full-contact, as PHG describe so well, there is no avoidance or resistance left to the here and now. When we really experience this level of contact there is by definition openness to the "fertile void", to the unknown, to the creativity that emerges from that "fertility". This connects with what Wolfert (2000) says about how the more "fundamental level" of Buddhist challenge can support our exploration of the "deeper grounds" of 'what is'. (p.82)

Naranjo (1993) discusses how Gestalt therapy can learn from the Eastern spiritual traditions how the experience of awareness can be so much more than awareness about the content of our selves. How there is an openness and connection with the transpersonal beyond content which is,

"... an *awareness of awareness*, a pure presence or pure wakefulness (*bodhi* in Buddhism)." (p.262)

Earlier he talks about,

"Perls' personal experience of satori (described in his autobiography) and his experience with meditation ... undoubtedly served as a background to his shaping of Gestalt therapy - perhaps without knowing it - into a modern equivalent of Buddhist practice." (p.187 my brackets)

He reflects that Perls embodied the integration between the psychological and the spiritual towards the end of his life (p.186).

Consciousness is defined in some Buddhist traditions as "openness or emptiness" (Wilber 2006 p.66), and this connects with the Taoist understanding of how there is unity in the nothingness "prior to form".

Finally, compassion is understood as an essential aspect of Buddhism. Kornfield (2000) says that compassion for the suffering of others and ourselves is essential if we are going to allow and transcend all the various sufferings that come with attachment to form and separateness from unity, in other words the suffering of our everyday lives.

## Hinduism

Wheway (1999) talks about his experience of a retreat at the Rajneesh ashram in India that enabled something to shift in him,

"identification with the story, with the description of who I was could give way. I was now the witness" (p.127).

This is very close to Gangaji's (2005) description of her experience with Ramana Maharshi, one of India's most famous recent teachers. She describes how he asked her to 'Stop' and from that, she let go of her story of herself, into pure being, stillness and openness, free from the 'trance' of the mind caught in everyday life. She goes on to say about consciousness,

"Consciousness is not an object. It is *hereness itself*. Our minds are usually involved with an object that appears and disappears in the hereness, and because of that, we overlook the nature of hereness. Pure consciousness is what these words appear in, what all bodies appear in. It infuses all words and bodies, and it is conscious of itself, and it is you. In your recognition of yourself as pure consciousness, you awaken yourself." (p.68-69)

This is the great theme of the Upanishads (Mascaro 1965), which are the foundation of Hinduism, that the formless universal spirit 'Brahman' brought the universe into existence so that it could see itself through people becoming 'self-conscious'. As Watts (1969) puts it

"... self and other, subject and object, organism and environment are poles of a single process, THAT is my true existence. As the Upanishads say, "That is self, That is real, That art thou!" (p.135)

This is connected to the 'presence' that Tolle (1999) has articulated as the "The Power of Now", moving the attention into this present moment with the awareness of being here, alive, witnessing the fact of our existence in whatever situation we are in. Watts (1969) was articulating just this approach in Esalen in the sixties and seventies. (Anderson 1983)

Tolle (2005a) describes how the process of moving into being 'aware of awareness' is a profound and an,

"... extraordinarily simple knowing, in which the knower and the known merge into one. Now the egoic split is healed and you are made whole again. We could describe the nature of this knowing thus: suddenly consciousness becomes conscious of itself. ... And even if your life has been full of mistakes, it takes only this knowing to redeem it and...endow the seemingly meaningless with profound meaning. ... I am not what happens, but the space in which it happens. ... Consciousness prior to form." (2005a p. xi/xii)

This is the same as Naranjo's "awareness of awareness" (above) and as Deikman (1996) puts it, "I equals awareness ... this other 'I' that is basic, that underlies desires, activities and physical characteristics ... 'I' is the observer, the experiencer, prior to all conscious content." (p.350)

He goes on to say,

"The failure of Western psychology to discriminate awareness from contents, and the resulting confusion of 'I' with mental contents, may be due to a cultural limitation: the lack of experience of most Western scientists with Eastern meditation disciplines."(p.354).

and,

"Knowing by being the identity of 'I' and awareness, is ontologically different from perceptual knowledge.." (p.354)

Williams (2006) definition of the spiritual includes the transformation that comes with this movement into "being both the observer and the observed." (p.9)

Whewy (1999) says, "Being, I think, is another word for spirit." (p.124) He goes on to say how he sees therapy as a spiritual process,

"... it is a Karmic Yoga, a path of action that leads to enlightenment ... It enables us ... to be both immanent ... and transcendent – that is less and less attached to these selves as they emerge from storytelling. To be fully in the world, yet not of it." (p124)

Perl's in his chapter on "Resolution" (Stevens ed. 1975) says, "We *are* awareness rather than *have* awareness." (p.69). He talks about how "gestalt formation" is the process through which the world functions on so many levels. How the arising of needs and the force towards their resolution, exist together with all the subsequent tensions and difficulties that arise in the attempts to get them met. How this process is endemic for everything living on the planet and how it operates through the play of opposites. He concludes,

"There is nothing but awareness endlessly coming forth. Beyond awareness there is nothing. At all points of discomfort it seeks to make itself comfortable. This one awareness appears to split into self / other so that in the trouble of search and finding, it can recall its parts and find itself intensely. Unquestioned, in peace it finds itself as one." (p.73)

This is as a clear re-statement of the Hindu perspective, where the force of Consciousness that created the universe, created our human self-consciousness, so that it could realise its own creation.

## Presence and Spirituality

Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan (2007) in discussing presence say how this,

“... integration and synthesis of self is rarely achieved, but does carry an inherent value as being an optimal, vivid, and integrated point of self-functioning.” (p.13)

Mostly we live in the “trance” of everyday life (as above) with ‘presence’ being a state of consciousness that is “rarely achieved” (p.13) in most people’s experience of daily life, which is why it is highly prized. The highlights of ordinary life give a glimpse of living with presence; for example when we ‘taken beyond ourselves’ by a work of art, moments of intimacy, awe at nature, special moments in sport or movement, music, literature, etc. These are Maslow’s (1968) “peak experiences”.

Presence is what Denham-Vaughan (2005) describes in her article “Will and Grace”, when she says,

“However we define the creative synthesis of Will and Grace ... It is the self-organisation that, on a good day, gives me a life that flows and buzzes with impassioned vitality. It is the self-function that permits me fully to contact and connect with life, ... at those times I have used my Will and all I have consciously learnt to get me to the place where I can let go.”

In this context she quotes Ramakrishna’s saying,

“... the winds of grace are always blowing, but you have to raise the sail.” (p.11)

Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan (2007) describe presence as,

“Alert yet calm. Attentive to, and connecting with, others.”(p.11).

They agree with Wolfert (2000) saying that presence “can also be called ‘full contact’” (p.13).

This corresponds to what PHG (1994) say about “final contact”, where,

“... one is aware of the unity. That is, the self (which is nothing but contact) comes to feel itself. What it is feeling is the interacting of the organism and the environment.” (p.196)

Wolfert (2000) calls this

“... “being”, the self as the final, fully-lived stage of contact. Being signifies dwelling in moments of unity ...” (p.82)

“Being”, here corresponds, I think to what Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan are calling ‘presence. The sense of self is changed in presence; I am present to my existence within, and as part of the world.

Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan (2007) in discussing “the process of presence” describes how there is an “oscillation between inner and outer”, between now and not-now, which continues until, “the two become truly unified and the separation disappears.” (p.17) This is a good description of what can happen in meditation (also Wilber 2006). PHG (1994) give a fascinating technical description of the process of finding presence,

“Fortunately, the true underlying unity can be demonstrated by a simple experiment: introspecting, try to include as objects of the acting “I” more and more pieces of the larger passive body-self; gradually, then all at once, the mind and body will coalesce, “I” and self will merge, the distinction of subject and object will disappear, and the aware self will touch the reality as perception ... That is the self, aware in middle mode, bursts the compartmenting of mind, body, and the external world.” (p.169)

So, subject and object come together in a unity that is presence. This corresponds with my experience of presence and contacting the spiritual. How occasionally, through being supported by my attention, or “will” and the environment, I have experienced the process of returning to now, again and again against the forces of distraction until there is this shift into the experience of unity, into a deeper connection with ‘now’, of silence, peace, integration, as in these quotes. I

am also aware that there are all degrees of connection to presence, even a touch can have a significant impact on the quality of a day.

Perls (1976) describes a particular aspect of this experience of holding the attention on the here and now in this way,

“... staying with the experience of the fertile void – experiencing his confusion to the utmost ... What happens ... is a schizophrenic experience in miniature.” (p.100)

“Confusion is transformed into clarity ... The fertile void increases self-support by making it apparent ... that he has much more available than he believed he had.” (p.101)

Something of this “oscillating” / “schizophrenic” process of confusion also applies to the other way I have experienced moving into presence, through the “aha” of therapy. The movement towards “impasse” is full of confusion (as above). Then there is the relief of the awareness of what I was avoiding, with the “aha” comes the understanding of the pain, hurt, shame, distress and ‘badness’. As this happens I become aware of my breathing, which gradually returns to the belly, I become more aware of my body and the tension it has been carrying and afterwards my heart is more open and my thinking clearer. With this presence there is relative stillness and space that comes from stopping the busy “verbalising mind” (PHG 1994).

Contact with here and now, with the void, as the writers here argue, brings presence and profoundly changes our relationship the world. Yet presence can also be very vulnerable and fragile. It is so easily disrupted by our defensive fight or flight reactions in response to “emergencies” (PHG 1994). Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan (2007) mention; tiredness, stress, illness, medication, alcohol, distraction, preoccupation and being too task orientated (p.15) as factors inhibiting presence. My experience is certainly that my presence can ‘switch off’ and become inaccessible to me when I’m caught in a reaction that relates to some unresolved / un-integrated aspect of myself, as PHG (1994) describe so well.

Kolodny (2004) and Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan (2007) describe how the increase in our ability to be “mindful” or present can develop over time, which I will look at below.

## The spiritual in the Dialogic I-Thou

Schoen (1994) describes how, in the Hasidic tradition that Buber was part of, there is the concept of the Void, with its “divine wisdom” and how they, “celebrated a cosmos divided, so that its members can have the joy of meeting” (p.114), mirroring the Hindu tradition above.

In describing his concept of “I-Thou”, Buber (1937/2003) says,

“To man the world is twofold ... The primary world is the combination of I-Thou, the other primary world the combination of I-It; ... the I of the primary word I-Thou is a different I from that of the primary word I-It. ... The primary word I-Thou can only be spoken with the whole being.”(p.15)

“I-It” is our relationship to objects, to ‘ordinary life’ and “I-Thou”, to “meeting a presence ... the realm of wholeheartedness, of love, of *Thou*.” (Schoen 1994 p.92). Buber continues,

“The *Thou* meets me through grace – it is not found by seeking. But... it is an act of my being ... I step into direct relation with it ... as any action of my whole being ... Concentration and fusion into the whole being can never take place through my agency, nor can it take place without me. I become through my relation to the *Thou* as I become *I*, I say *Thou*. ... All real living is meeting.” (1937 p.24/25)

This seems to me a description of presence, it is where through being ‘aware of my awareness’, there is more of a whole ‘I’ able to participate in “Thou”. According to Schoen (1994) Buber wrote “I and Thou” while teaching a course titled “Religion as Presence.” (p.97) This connects

the esoteric heart of religion directly to the experience of 'presence', which is a common theme amongst these writers. The quote above also shows Buber's awareness of the paradox of action and non-action, how connection with "I-Thou" is with something beyond the self but can't happen without the active 'I' of the self.

For Buber (2003) I-Thou is our connection to God. Harris (2000) quotes Buber,  
"God dwells wherever man lets him in." (p.50)

Which points to our existential choice in the matter, like the Ramakrishna quote above.

Schoen (2008) talks about his understanding of how Buber's I-Thou  
"... is a system ... it isn't relativistic. It is absolute. It is a spiritual ultimate thing." (p.31)  
He says that beyond the intellectual understanding of therapy and its techniques,  
"I-Thou comes first and last, and goes beyond all thought." "I-Thou is a depth of inner  
and of outer contact which the heart always longs for." (p.32)

Hycner (1995) discusses how for him the dialogical approach leads him to the spiritual, to a reality greater than the world of objects, of "I-It", how "I-Thou" is a "spiritual or transpersonal dimension." (p.93), and  
"I feel more and more that in my best moments, I am present to, and sometimes the instrument of, some spiritual reality." (p.93)

Jacobs (1995) describes "I-Thou" as,  
"... a moment in which we are totally absorbed with another, which paradoxically puts us profoundly in contact with our *humanity*, with the knowledge of *being*; in this moment the meaning of human existence is revealed." (p.58)

This is very close to Wolfert's "full-contact" as well as Tolle's statement above, about how in finding presence, we find the meaning in our lives.

Hycner (1995) sees the dialogic as a "new paradigm" in which "I-It" and "I-Thou" are figure and ground to each other. How the dialogical is, "a rhythmic alternation of I-Thou and I-It connectedness." (p.92) He goes on to define psychopathology "as the result of an early *aborted dialogue*" (p.94), a breaking of our most "primordial orientation". (p.94) From this he argues that we need to place,

"... less emphasis on the individual as an entity and more emphasis on the relationship, and the relational ability of the client." (p.94)

that we need to move away from the individually focused "*self*-actualisation" of humanistic psychology towards a

"... "relational actualisation", which encompasses self-actualisation. Self-actualisation arises as a by product of enhanced relational connectedness." (p.94)

Hycner (1995) also acknowledges how this difference is "a statement of the inherent paradoxical nature of our existence." (p.94) We exist as a "perduring self" and at the same time are not separate. Wheeler (2006) also makes this point, which is explored below.

## The Spiritual in Intersubjectivity

Wheeler (2006) relates Gestalt therapy to the spiritual by saying,  
"If we were not fundamentally one with the unified field, there would be no such thing as contact, interaction, relationship, communication, communion. And if we were not individuals, we would never *register* the world or contact." (p.17)

Through being able to hold this complexity of both "the one and the many", is to him a spiritual perspective were we can find a profound acceptance, and the source of love,

"I am me *and* I am you, and you are you *and* you are me, the one and the many – is the actual experience of love. We all know it, we all want more of it." (p.17)

How

"In the end the gestalt paradigm of radical participation, radical belonging *is* a spiritual perspective; and the practice of living and healing under that paradigm is itself a spiritual practice." (p.37)

This corresponds very closely to the Hindu, Taoism and Zen views above. How we are attached to the polarities of life, of self and other, good and bad, right and wrong, light and dark. We don't see how one cannot exist without the other. If we can really see that, we can be free of attachment and then participate in "the game of life", without identification and attachment, knowing that we are not separate isolated beings. (Watts 1969)

Williams (2006) also discusses the 'intersubjective' emphasis on the relational aspects of experience and how it,

"... makes human connection and relationship the basis for an embodied type of spiritual experience." (p.10-11)

This corresponds to Wheeler's view, and that of I-Thou, above, that we reach the spiritual through engaging in relationship. What is clear from above is that presence is an essential aspect of this process.

Another aspect of the intersubjective approach which connects it with the spiritual is that of acceptance, intimacy and the concern with shame. Wheeler's emphasis is on the "structure of ground" (1991, 2000, 2006), and how he sees the field as strongly biased towards the individualistic paradigm. From this he sees the urgent task as being to support and allow our needs, to combat the introjections around self-sufficiency and the denial of needs and vulnerability. How we have a deep need for acceptability in terms of,

"... affirmation of my membership, my belonging to a world of common identification" (2002 p.46)

And how this support has,

"... more to do with resonance and belonging than with 'soft' supports of agreement or affirmation." (ibid)

The spiritual nature of this is confirmed by Lee & Wheeler (1996) who describe how the sense of acceptance, in I-Thou, is the same as the spiritual experience of "deep union, or grace" (p.48) and that this experience is so "effective at transforming ... shame" (p.49). They describe how "Maya", which is the illusion of the experience of separateness and isolation in Hindu spirituality, is their "field definition of shame" (p.49). How it is ultimately connection and acceptance that supports us to be available for intimacy and support. Naranjo (1993) describes how the spiritual "constitutes the deepest self-support" (p.261).

## Christian approach to spirituality and Gestalt

I wanted to include a section on the connection between Gestalt psychotherapy and spiritual experience from a Christian perspective but was unable to find any suitable material. Christianity is fundamental to our Western spiritual tradition and yet all the spiritual connections that are made in the Gestalt literature seem largely with the Eastern traditions. It seems that there is gap here, which needs further investigation.

Wheeler (2006), Wheway (1999), Kennedy (2008) all talk about the connection between Gestalt therapy, the spiritual and love. It is this aspect of spirituality which seems to connect most strongly with the Judaeo / Christian / Islamic traditions.

God's Love is at the heart of these religions, both learning to love God and experiencing the unconditional 'Love of God'. To me the meaning of this is the same as the experiences of presence, contact, embodiment, the "fertile void", discussed above, but interpreted in different ways. For example, "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear" (Bible, John 4:18)

which describes the integrative experience of spiritual connection with the sense of fundamental support (as above) where fear can be let go of, at least temporarily, and love can be 'let in'.

Love is an essential part of this connection to the "fertile void", of our "Ground of Being", something that Kolodny (2004) expressed it like this,

"Consciousness cures and heals not in virtue simply of its being perception or a movement of the body towards the world, but because it is informed by love. This is the love that precedes knowledge, that is given with primordial contact and which is awakened in the heart of the client by a therapist who brings her own open-heartedness to the session." (p.24-25)

Another connection between Christianity and therapy is around the nature of forgiveness and confession. In therapy there is no judgement and the attempt is to help the client get past their introjections around being 'bad' and 'good'. Taking responsibility for ourselves, our behaviour, thoughts and feelings, 'owning up to' how and what we are has a confessional quality. It is a step towards letting go of our introjected self-judgements and finding forgiveness for ourselves.

It seems to me that Jesus' acceptance of his ultimate suffering is an important aspect of Christianity and an example of what we need to do in order to face our unavoidable suffering. How it is only through facing our fear, hurt or distress that we can start to integrate, grow and understand ourselves, and how with this seeing and understanding comes forgiveness of self and other, i.e. "love", as Kolodny says above.

Pagels (2003) argues that, Jesus' saying, "for the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 12:21) or "the Kingdom is within you" (Thomas 3, p.54) points towards a personal process of finding God within us, which seems to equate well the experience of integration and love described above.

It also seems to me that the experience of gaining some freedom, from the prison of being caught in unaware "automaton" living, can generate 'Faith', which I see as trust in the knowledge that 'underneath' the "trance" of ordinary or "neurotic" living, there is Goodness, meaning and purpose.

## The Body in Presence and Spirituality

Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan (2007), as part of their description of presence say,

"In particular, when we experienced ourselves as 'most present', we were paying attention to bodily sensations and focusing on these in order to increase awareness."(p.16)

This connects with the way that the body and breath are also basic to many forms of meditation (Wolfert 2000, Wilber 2006) and is something that Tolle (1999) also supports,

"If you keep your attention in the body as much as possible, you will be anchored in the Now. ... Instead of mentally projecting yourself away from Now, go more deeply into the Now by going more deeply into the body. ... When you focus within and feel the inner body, you immediately become still and present as you are withdrawing consciousness from the mind." (p. 97-98)

Kolodny talks about "remembering to remember to be present" (2004 p.97) and this also corresponds to Laura Perls' famous play on words, "when you are a body you are somebody". Kepner (1996) emphasises how restoring,

"... body sensation through the work on the desensitisation of the body goes a long way to recovering one's sense of actuality." (p.109)

PHG (1994) describe so well (above) how neuroses curtails our awareness, we become 'over intellectual', in a "trance" and unable to feel, or we become anxious and unable to think. How

these processes all occur *in our bodies*, which reflect every psychic disturbance through tension, de-sensitisation or sickness.

Kennedy (2003, 2005, 2008) discusses his investigations into the work of Merleau-Ponty with his concerns for how perception and consciousness are deeply connected to our embodied experience of ourselves in the world.

"The world that emerges is built upon this underlay of self-presence which we call consciousness." (2008 p.19) "For Merleau-Ponty that direction is increasingly to move towards meaning. And what is that meaning? It is precisely that coherent self-presence that I spoke about earlier. It is where the parts cohere and are in harmony with my experience of the world." (p.23)

Wheeler (2002) put it this way,

"To me, what is true is that we are all one being, deeply located and participating in a shared energetic field, of which we are each a unique expression, a unique point of view. Our existence is permeated by this shimmering energy, which is consciousness ..."

(p.47)

All humanistic approaches (Moss 1999) emphasise the need to re-connect head, heart and body back together. As above, for 'presence' we need heart, head and body integrated to experience "full contact", presence is, as Smuts (1926) put it, a transformative whole,

"Creative Evolution synthesises from the parts a new entity not only different from but quite transcending them. That is the essence of a whole." (p.340)

The above quotes show I think how this connection to sensation and awareness of the energy of our bodies is essential for presence, that it makes our connection to the world visceral and is a vital part of our sense of meaning.

## Wilber's "Three Faces of God"

Wilber's (2006) "Integral model" divides everything existing up into three dimensions; that of the "first person" or "I", our personal experience; that of the "second person" or "We", our relational experience; and lastly that of the "third person" or "It", the objective world. He applies this to the spiritual dimension of life as well, referring to them as "the three faces of God". I think this is interesting for this essay because the above review can usefully be seen in these terms, from these three perspectives.

"First person" spirituality is reflected more in the Eastern traditions and presence, as above, it is Naranjo's (1993) "awareness of awareness", the "I AM" recognition that my consciousness here and now, it is the recognition of being a part of the Consciousness that created the universe, the experience of unity.

The "second person" spirituality the emphasis is on "I-Thou" on our relationship to the other or to God. This is where the Judeo Christian / Islamic approaches are centred, on the love of God, on our relationship to God, on surrender, worship, devotion and faith.

Wilber (2006) sees the "third person", "It" aspect of spirituality as being the observable scientific nature of the universe, with our knowledge and understanding of the world. This is an aspect that gets lost in fundamentalism of any kind. As new information emerges we need more sophisticated and re-configured wholes, to include it.

Another perspective which fits this idea of "three faces of God" is to see the spiritual experiences and understandings presented above through the lens of our basic humanistic structure of head, heart and body. Wilber (2006) refers to these as "lines of development". The

Eastern traditions do seem to focus on the “mind” in terms of developing “awareness”. They also developed the ‘physical’ paths of, for example, Yoga or Tai Chi. The Western traditions focused more on the heart in terms of the unconditional “Love of God”.

In many ways it seems impossible to separate the spiritual into these different aspects, they all intermingle inseparably, with any spiritual connection influencing the whole field. But I do think these structures provide some clarity in terms of reducing the confusion that can arise from how the spiritual manifests differently from each of these “faces”.

## Self as contact process / self as process of integration

Another confusion that arises in looking at the relationship between Gestalt and the spiritual is one that comes from how the self is understood. Gestalt therapy theory has two ways of looking at the self. One says that our self, at any moment, is formed through the process of contact with environment (e.g. PHG 1994); how the self is “of the field, not in it” (Yontef 1993), how it is defined through its “relationship” (Philippson 2001) to the world. The self is not a fixed “thing”, but a process continually re-forming in response to the ever changing environment. Wolfert (2000) and Kolodny (2004) argue that the Buddhist perspective largely agrees with this view of the self, that fixity is an illusion.

The other way of looking at the self, is a developmental one (also PHG 1994) where, over time, the self either grows, integrates finds ever greater freedom to “contact” life ‘as it is’ in the most satisfying way it can, or it ossifies, becoming ever more fixed and rigid.

But there is something of a contradiction between these two views. If the self is not a ‘thing’ how can ‘it’ develop? Many Gestalt writers concede that the self is a separate ‘thing’ to some extent, e.g. Wheeler (as above, “the one and the many”) “... and if we were not individuals, we would never *register* the world or contact.”, Hycner (1995) “our perduring self” and Wolfert (2000) “It is after all, *our* experiencing.”(p. 84). Wolfert goes on to say that this difference is about, “Whether we wish to emphasise continuity or change depends on our purpose.”(p.84).

This difference in perspectives on the self also reminds me of how matter at the quantum level can be observed as both wave and particle, process or a thing. (Goswami 1995)

In the developmental view of the self in PHG (1994), the “neurotic” self with its, “active ego”, is seen as “false” or “inauthentic”, (this can be seen as the ‘illusory’ self of Buddhism above) with maturity being seen as the movement from environmental support to self-support (Perls 1975). This is the journey of increasing integration, away from being at the mercy of our “automaton” like compulsively reactive way of living, where much of our experience happens around the ways we “interrupt contact” and avoid ‘what is’ (PHG 1994). This reflects how, with every introject, or repression the self is “split”, and a “should” or “ought” established. Every split creates the reaction to maintain the separation between head, heart and body and therefore unawareness (PHG 1994).

Through facing the ‘trauma’, the hurt, distress or pain, that caused us to ‘split’ we can heal the wounds and integrate, we can put ‘ourselves back together’ and become more present (as above), developing a clearer sense of what we want and need. Contact is then simpler and easier, there is a more “coherent self” (Kennedy 2008) to make contact with clearer figures and greater satisfaction. Through “repairing our ego-functioning” we have more choice over our motivations and behaviour (PHG 1994, Philippson 2001) and an “an ever-growing sense of ownership of experience” (McConville & Wheeler 2001 p.41) As the self integrates and heals it becomes stronger, less defensive and more able to be self-supportive, choiceful, responsible and *able* to be “relational” (Philippson 2001).

As Kolodny (2004) says in talking about the power that awareness has to transform us, "... enlightenment can be understood as the incremental or spontaneous eradication of these hindrances so that the mind and heart (and body) are unimpeded in their ability to rest in present awareness – *full contact* in Gestalt terms." (p.96 - my brackets)

From here, and *after* this integration of the self, PHG (1994) describe how the self is able to let go into the unknown of the fertile void where, "... the self does not have much personality. It is the sage of Tao that is "like water", ... it sees it(self) again as part of a vast field." (PHG 1994 p.206).

There is less ego and personality, the id fills the space. From the spiritual perspective this development is towards the healing of the final object / subject split, seeing through the illusion of our separateness from the "vast field".

This developmental view sees the self moving closer to presence over time, through integration and psychological freedom. But, as above, especially within "Buddhism" and "Presence" we saw how the spiritual emerged through "full-contact" in the here and now. This is the difference between "wave and particle" as above.

As process, our here and now experience is of constantly changing states, reflecting our constantly changing needs and conditions of the environment. The essential nature of states is that they are always changing, as the self is always changing. We can experience moments of profound spiritual connection which can have a profound influence on our sense of self, lasting from moments to weeks. But as Kornfield (2000) says, they don't last; they leave a mark but we cannot necessarily integrate them into ourselves permanently and cannot, at will, re-make the connection.

Then there is the development of our consciousness over time. This is the maturation of the structure of the self as above, with its more permanent achievements, especially in terms of the ability to embody ever greater wholes of complexity and degrees of awareness (Wheeler 2006). This is the gradual 'staged' process of gaining psychological freedom which lets our hearts and our heads and our bodies expand, embodying new wholes which are greater than the sum of its parts. We can, and do, grow and develop.

Development is important from a spiritual perspective because it shows the road along which we are travelling. It shows that the road does not end at personal psychological freedom, but it goes onto towards the possibilities of ever greater integration and freedom, that the above spiritual experiences point towards.

PHG (1994) make clear that living closer to the Tao comes *after* the self is healed of its splits and needs to avoid contact. This is what many of the world's spiritual teachers (Wilber 2006, Kornfield 2000) have said, that we have to develop a "strong ego" before we can start to let go of it. Without healing the self and "repairing our ego-functions" we are "building on sand" and there are all sorts of problems that can emerge from moving into the spiritual as a way of avoiding this work.

These 'problems' occur when we try to "let go" prematurely, trying to reach the spiritual or transpersonal connection as a way of trying to 'bypass' the painful and hard work of healing the ego, of healing the splits in the self.

## Some difficulties that arise in approaching spirituality

There are many problems that arise when the spiritual is 'aimed at' or pursued as a way of avoiding the painful work involved in finding psychological freedom.

History is full of stories of people indentifying evangelically with 'God'. Symington (2002) has argued powerfully that this process is narcissistic at its heart, that for these people the experience of finding their narcissistic wounds apparently 'healed' by connecting to the 'power of God', is very seductive. It is a giving up of personal responsibility for unbearable conflict and pain. The spiritual connection may start by being a real opening, but it is partial, built on an unbalanced feeling dominated compensatory process, which is hung onto like a "self-rock" (Wolfert 2000). People so identified are blind to reason as they fiercely maintain the splits between head, heart and body. History tells us time and again about how this 'fierceness' has so often turned profoundly negative. This is the psychology of cults, the "them and us" of fundamentalism.

Elements of this process are discussed by all the spiritual writers here, the "catch 22" of spirituality is that as soon as there is some projective attachment and identification with it as a goal, we are taken away from here and now and thus away from the spiritual. Having a "goal" is one of Philipppson's objections to the spiritual / humanistic approach (2001 p.9). But I think that he 'throws the baby out with the bathwater' by not taking onboard the spiritual experiences discussed above.

Herrigel (1978) in "Zen and the Art of Archery" describes how (to his initial horror) he spent his first years training only a few feet from the target. He then wonderfully describes how he came to understand that 'aiming' was irrelevant and that attending to the process was everything.

This was the theme of Krishnamurti's (1969) teaching, that searching for enlightenment in the future is a contradiction in terms, and that the movement can only be into the here and now. All the spiritual writers here caution against becoming identified with spiritual searching. Kornfield (2000) describes how spiritual ideas and experiences especially, can become "just another thing to let go of" (p96). Gangaji says trying to develop "consciousness is a huge mistake" (p.70) because it is, anyway, always present. As Herrigel found, "aiming" just takes us away from where we need to be.

Frankl (1946 / 1992) articulated this when he said,  
"What is called self-actualisation is not an attainable aim at all, for the simple reason that the more one would strive for it, the more he would miss it. In other words, self-actualisation is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence"  
(p.115)

There are echoes of "The Paradoxical theory of Change" (Beisser 1970) here.

Many people have pointed out the psychological difficulties that surround those who take on the spiritual perspective and become identified with it. Both Yontef (1993), Wolfert (2000), Philipppson (2001) all argue that people look to metaphysical "rocks" in order to alleviate anxieties.

Hayes (2007) describes the process (which I recognises from my own past) of how focusing on the here and now in an attempt to be 'spiritual', but can also turn into avoidance on an emotional level. He warns that,

"The recent enthusiasm for mindfulness ... risks creating just another form of Western self-indulgence." (p.17)

Welwood (1994) and Cashwell, Myers & Shurts (2004) describe the psychological process which they call "spiritual bypass" as being where people use,

“... spiritual experience, beliefs, or practices to avoid (or bypass) psychological wounds.” (p.403).

Wink, Dillion & Fay (2005) also discuss the limitations of those chasing spiritual experience, “Hypersensitive narcissists also display the despair, fragility, and the search for deliverance from self-pain portrayed as characterizing spiritual seekers.” (p.145).

Again, Gangaji (2005) expresses this,

“One of the dangers I have seen of the so-called "spiritual life" is the ego's attempt to use spiritual life to escape heartbreak, difficulty, and continued patterns of hatred, revenge, and war—to escape the idea of a hell. The desire for transcendence becomes bigger than the willingness to let the heart open to it all, the totality of human beauty as well as the totality of human catastrophe. When you are willing to fully experience the hopelessness and the horror of being human, the eternal potential for living life in truth is freed.” (p231)

This is to me the “Paradoxical Theory of Change” (ibid) in profound action. It is only by facing our held pain and distress, our “catastrophe”, that we can undo our splits, let go of our fears and become more open and trusting.

The other side of this paradox however is that, when we find presence, (and because of our partial/split nature), the un-integrated neurotic aspect of ego, or “character”, including our narcissism, can also be strengthened. So contact with the transpersonal can support grandiosity (as per evangelicalism above, which Symington (1996) describes). This process is surely inevitable as our insecurities produce an ‘active ego’ rather than an “otiose” one (PHG 1994).

So, the ego cannot help but take for itself some of the power and freedom that presence brings. I think this is why Symington (2002) makes clear that narcissism is a lifetime's process to work through. Also, why many people talk about growth in terms of a spiral (Wilber 2006, Beck & Cowan 1996) in which we revisit the same issues again and again, but from places slightly changed by our increased awareness, and why change is largely slow and incremental.

## Gestalt, the spiritual and meaning

So what does all this mean? Yontef (1993) says “Meaning is the configuration of a figure against a ground.” (p.10). The figures here, are, I think, our needs, as Perls (1975) discussed above; how needs arise from the fabric of life itself and how meaning comes from the arising and meeting of needs. I eat because I am hungry, earn money to survive, choose life over death, these are meaningful activities. This is Maslow's (1968) “hierarchy of needs”. Wheeler (2006) says that one of our deepest needs is to make meaning,

“... the constructivist, meaning-making nature of the human mind and human self ... our ceaseless activity of making a whole picture” (p14)

We go mad from not being able to make sense of ourselves and our lives, as Bateson (1999) showed in his understanding of the “double bind” behind schizophrenia.

More pointedly Frankl (1959/1992) says,

“Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a “secondary rationalisation” of instinctive drives” (p.105)

He goes on to say that we discover meaning in life through three different ways. Firstly through by our actions, secondly through our relationships and thirdly “by the attitude we take towards unavoidable suffering.” (p.115).

This third “way”, the struggle to accept unavoidable suffering, is as I understand it the work of integration or therapy. Meaning gets lost in the confusion and conflict of all our compensatory processes around our avoidance of suffering; the avoidance of contact through introjection, projections, deflections, retroreflections and egoism, (PHG 1994, Polster & Polster 1974). When

we have split our 'self', through trauma of whatever type, we attempt to maintain the unawareness of our underlying "organismic" needs, because to allow them would necessarily connect us with what we fear, as well as to the loss of what we have needed whilst maintaining the unawareness (PHG 1994). Maslow (1968) also makes this point, "Neurosis is very often a deficiency disease." (p.178), Whewey (1999) talks about this in terms of "primal wounding",  
"... transpersonal development as continuous with the ordinary work of therapy, in that throughout, what is sought is integration of splitting and fragmentation brought about by primal wounding." (p.124)

PHG (1994) make clear that our "neurotically" directed attempted 'solutions' can never satisfy or resolve the underlying conflict. But as we face our fear and pain, integration occurs, life starts to make more sense and we are able to increasingly meet our real "organismic" needs, as opposed to our "neurotic", wishes. When we understand 'what is', the "structure of our situation" (PHG 1994), we become more aware of, and understand what our "organismic" needs are, the suffering begins to make sense and meaning emerges. Even if those needs cannot be met, the awareness of them transforms our sense of self because we then understand and can see that we are not 'mad' or 'bad' and can face the hurt and grieve the loss without the feared destruction of our self, happening.

The task then is to know ourselves well enough to know what our more "organismic" needs are as it is these that provide us with meaning and purpose. The writers here are saying that the deepest and most meaningful needs and satisfaction comes from the spiritual dimensions of life. As above, this can be seen in terms of a whole which comprises our; heads, with our need for awareness and understanding; our hearts with the need for relationship, for love and intimacy, for openness, to know and be known; and our bodies in terms of attention and knowledge, towards an energised embodiedness.

PHG (1994) describe the self,

"But the self is precisely the integrator; it is the *synthetic* unity, as Kant said. It is the artist of life ... it plays the crucial role of finding and making the meanings that we grow by. (p.11)

Our 'self' sorts out the priorities of our needs, it has the wisdom to know when to choose what to attend to next, in every situation. The self is enormously wise if we can listen to it rather than to our ego. The process of growth can be seen as how, through undoing our splits, we become increasingly able, firstly, to know what our "organismic" needs are, and then to meet them. As the self becomes less confused and lost, its creativity increases, becoming freer, more powerful and spontaneous and able to make meaning, as above. (PHG 1994). Again, as Merleau-Ponty said above, meaning is "self-coherence" (Kennedy 2008).

As we 'integrate', either through a moment of full-contact, or through development over time, the sum of the parts of head, heart and body become something greater and presence becomes possible. There is a 'magic' here; contacting the here and now demands the integration of heart, head and body in presence. We can't fully meet the here and now without becoming a transformed whole to some degree. (as PHG 1994 above)

It is in this context that Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan (2007) say, there is nothing as deeply satisfying as presence. This is why the spiritual is so powerful, through connecting to presence, love, understanding and relaxation we find our deepest satisfaction, our "deepest self-support". This is what Tolle describes in the quote above, how a moment's awareness can make sense of the whole of our life up to this moment.

Kepner (1996) confirms this view in discussing the spiritual in terms of "the transcendent". He argues that "transcendence" is an "essential part of the process of therapy with survivors of early trauma." And an essential part of the "reconsolidation phase" of healing, where there is the need for something that can provide meaning in a larger frame than their experience to

date. This can then “encompass and hold the aberrant quality of the trauma.” (p.136) With the progress of therapy and the client's ownership of their feelings the “transcendental” can support them in letting go of their ‘victimhood’ and give them something,

“... that imbues past, present, and future with significance and direction. ... “The transcendent perspective ... is different *dimensionally*. It imbues the field *as a whole*. ...

The transcendent frame is a context that holds *us*, rather than what we hold or even *can* hold as individuals.” (p.136-136)

The success of AA style support groups can be understood in this context.

From the above we can see how anything that we, or our clients, say or do, has its meaning in relationship to our needs. How every twist and turn of our struggles in life are necessary and there for us to learn from, how our needs can be seen as being part of the force moving us towards meeting our ultimate needs around awareness, ‘being’ and love. As therapists, holding the awareness of this ground, allows us to connect to our own presence, to accept and have compassion for ourselves and our clients. It seems to me like a ‘golden thread’ that can run through the relationship between therapist and client. Connecting to it, re-awakens us to our presence and the meaning of our and our clients' lives, to Buber's “I-Thou”.

As we integrate we become more and more attuned to the essential value that comes from fulfilling our needs at ever more profound levels. The experience and satisfaction of our deepest needs provides us with our aim and purpose. This brings us to ...

## The aim or purpose of Gestalt and Spirituality

The Tao Te Ching (1973) expresses the idea that everything is only as it can be, at this moment and that there is a natural flow to the unfolding manifestation of the “ten thousand things”. Forcing anything is seen as counter-productive with negative consequences.

This corresponds very well to the inherent directionality of the Paradoxical Theory of Change (Beisser 1970) which says that change occurs, not through trying to change, but through becoming more fully ourselves. Trying, or doing, can be seen as coming from ‘oughts’ and ‘shoulds’ of our “introjections” (Polster & Polster 1974).

The concept of “Organismic Self-Regulation” (PHG 1994) also supports this Taoist view in that it says that change follows its own lawful journey through the process of figure formation and destruction, one that is worked out between the self and the environment at every moment through the “contact process”, and that there is a deep wisdom in this process.

The wisdom inherent in organismic self-regulation and the Paradoxical Theory of Change demonstrates the force towards increased awareness or Consciousness in our lives. Bates (2001) explores this in looking at the wisdom of our “shadow” in “The Three Little Pigs” myth, “All these wolves are *life pushing* us into more life” (p.99 my emphasis)

This force is also there, by definition, in Holism's “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” (Smuts 1926) and Field Theory's “Phenomena are determined by the whole field ... The field is a unitary whole” (Yontef 1993 p.297). This “unitary whole” from the spiritual perspectives above can be seen as the Tao, the “fertile void” or God.

From this spiritual perspective Lewin's, “the need organises the field of experience” (quoted in Wheeler 2008 p.216), can be seen as our consciousness organising the field, which is part of “Consciousness” or the Tao organising the field. The same applies to Gestalt Psychology's principle of “Pragnanz” which “states that the field will form itself into the best possible gestalt that global conditions will allow.”(Yontef 1993 p.147)

All these phenomena it seems to me, point to Consciousness as a teleological force, this fits the spiritual views above, of how Consciousness or the Tao created the universe in order to become conscious and see itself. Naranjo (1993) connects these in saying, "... attunement to what may be called either 'Tao' or 'divine will' – or ... organismic self-regulation." (p.235). What's become clear to me is that the whole of our functioning, is about this movement towards our ultimate need for self-awareness. Just as Perls described above, about how life works through the process of need. We are this 'need' or desire of Consciousness to become conscious of itself.

This also fits with many of the world's creation myths (Campbell & Moyers 1988), including, (if you strip out the 'Christian morality') the story of Adam and Eve eating of the tree of knowledge and having to leave Eden. By eating the apple they embody the subject / object split, become aware of themselves as separate and are thus embarked on the journey to re-integrate.

I think this also fits with our 'new myth' of the story of evolution; of the universe emerging from 'nothing' fourteen billion years ago, of our planet's development, of life and its self-regulation as Gaia, the developing ever complexity of life towards self-consciousness of human beings. From this, our purpose can be seen as simply following our "organismic" nature towards developing ever more awareness and thus participate more and more fully in this cosmic game of hide and seek. As Perls said, "The organism knows all. We know very little." (1969).

The end of the 'game', and our purpose, according to the spiritual perspectives explored here, is to transcend our "object / subject" split so that we can rest in 'being', in the Tao, in the self-consciousness of the universe.

The "end of the game" in Gestalt Therapy as PHG (1994) articulated it is to resolve the unfinished needs of our 'active ego' so that we can allow ourselves to fully let go into the fertile void of the Tao.

Gestalt therapy knows that our "illusion of separateness" is entirely functional. It keeps the held or repressed pain and distress that we have not been able to cope with, out of awareness. There is no "right" and "wrong"; through therapy we attend to the pain, face the suffering and free ourselves from the need to perpetuate the illusion. This enables us to engage increasingly in the here and now embodying our connectedness to life, to 'reality rather than fantasy' (Perls 1976), with the potential of eventually seeing through the illusion of our separateness.

This is where Gestalt therapy's holism is so powerful. Instead of exhorting us to 'get past' our 'desires' or 'sins' as many spiritual / religious traditions seem to end up doing; Gestalt theory says that there is the wisdom of organismic self-regulation, in all of them. Every "resistance" or "hindrance" has its meaning and learning to give. Wheeler (2008) celebrates Goodman's radical achievement in understanding this.

"But the centrepiece of the vision, the relocation of Eros to the centre of our natural selves ... as key not to our doom but our salvation – was pure Goodman." (p.221)

All our needs, wants and desires, however distorted by trauma into "neurotic" expressions, are still reflections of Consciousness (Eros) trying to see itself.

Moore (1992) makes clear how that all our 'negative' responses and behaviour, our dislike of others, our anger, hatred or jealousy, our self destructive behaviour, our narcissism, are all expressions of our "soul's" needs. How facing these "shadow" aspects of ourselves through increased awareness and self-knowledge, means coming to terms with what we have split off or disowned. What we split off are, in the end, aspects of our "soul", our underlying fundamental needs, for love, acceptance, understanding, awareness or 'being'.

It seems that it does not so much matter what we do (apart from not damaging others) if we can bring some self-awareness and presence to our 'here and now' it means we become part of

the unfolding deepening of our consciousness and therefore part of the intentionality of Consciousness. There can be a deep recognition of participating in "Truth, Goodness and Beauty" (Wilber 2006)

So it seems to me that Gestalt therapy provides a practical, holistic and beautiful way of freeing ourselves for the journey towards meeting our ultimate need described by the spiritual perspectives in this essay.

## The Paradox of Action / Non-Action

Kolodny (2004), (amongst others here), argues, that we do not need to 'to do' anything, other than attend to 'what is', our phenomenology, to allow and trust in the power of awareness and being, attending to its unfolding, and the understanding that comes with it.

However in practice, this "not doing" seems to be impossible for most of us most of the time; we can only achieve presence and being by moments and certainly not at will. Most of the time we are partial, caught in the 'illusion' of our separateness, with our "active ego", its fear and splits and struggle to find that trust. Yet we still want freedom and relief from suffering and so are stuck with the paradox of trying for what cannot be tried for.

Buber articulated this impossible paradox,

"The *Thou* meets me through grace – it is not found by seeking. But... it is an act of my being ... I step into direct relation with it ... as any action of my whole being ... Concentration and fusion into the whole being can never take place through my agency, nor can it take place without me. I become through my relation to the *Thou* as I become / ... All real living is meeting." (1937 p.24/25)

Nothing comes of passivity, yet in activity the likelihood is (given our split nature) that we are being motivated by un-aware forces and so condemned to the situation where, "it is not found by seeking". So how do we proceed? This is the subject of the most famous of the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita (Mascaro 1965) where Arjuna and Krishna have an epic debate over the merits of action versus non-action. (This is also the subject of centuries of debate within Christianity over the issue of "free will")

At some existential level we either continue trying to solve the riddle of our existence or we give up. But we can't 'give up' without considerable internal conflict and resignation. It seems that we are in the middle of this cosmic game of hide and seek, like it or not and our choice and responsibility plays a crucial role in the game. This is what I think Greaves (1977 Ed. Smith) meant in saying that,

"Choice is the only mystery of life as great as being." (p197)

We have to choose, but can't choose, or don't know what to choose. Buber (above) says it has to be, "an act of my being", which I understand as making the most integrated, best, most existential choice we can at the moment.

On the one side of this game the spiritual perspective shows how our destiny is mapped out. If we could just drop our attachment to our ego, as Gangaji (above) described, we would become instantly enlightened. If we could let go and remain in the here and now, we would be free of having to face the dilemmas of choice and action. We could rest in non-action, be the Zen or Tao of 'non-doing', simply following the direction and creativity of Consciousness and Love.

On the other side there is our separateness, our subject / object split, which as Kornfield (2000) describes, even those with a high degree of 'enlightenment' still need to continue working on. So we are stuck with our separateness and the way that this plays out through our struggles

around choice and responsibility, action or non-action. We can experience moments of relative freedom in 'states' of presence, but until separateness is no longer there, there is the dissonance inherent in our experience of separateness. It 'tugs' at our consciousness with its desire for resolution, Consciousness wanting to become conscious, but needing our engagement in the process for the 'game' to be meaningful.

If there was no choice there would be total determinism and if choice is everything then meaning becomes entirely personally and socially constructed (as in post-modernism) and spiritual experience, presence and levels of integration and development lose much of their meaning.

## Support, Challenge and Presence in Therapy

This tension is reflected directly in the issue of support and challenge and how Gestalt therapy is a dance around this theme. The difference between support on the one hand, being with what is, accepting and embodying our experience with whatever difficulties are there, supporting our client's beingness and experience of 'what is'. On the other hand the need to challenge, to question the choices and unawareness, together with all the necessary struggles involved in developing new awareness. The grief, loss and depression involved in gradually letting go of our "active ego" attachments.

This is, in turn, reflected in the different approaches within Gestalt therapy. Perls (1975) challenged his clients' attempts to manipulate their environment for support, and today Philippon's (2001) focus is on our need to accept our existential responsibility and how,

"... the central act in human psychological functioning is choosing;" (2001 p.32)

He emphasises the importance of being a "strong other" against which clients can know themselves and that we can only know ourselves through our "relationship" to the world.

The risks here are around how our ego inevitably identifies with the idea of choice, we so easily move into the world of 'shoulds' and 'oughts', blame and guilt because, I think, we have been deeply conditioned to associate choice and responsibility with blame. Also as Lee & Wheeler (1996) argued, we naturally adjust to demanding environments by hiding our shame and therefore ourselves; when we do not feel accepted enough we cannot / do not, risk the contact that we need to grow.

On the other side there is Wheeler's (2006), Hycner's (1995) and Jacobs' (2005) "intersubjective" approach with their emphasis on attending to the ground on which we stand and the co-created nature of our dialogic encounter, and concern to try to get past the dynamics of shame. The attempt is to provide acceptance at a deep level, to diminish the power inequalities and recognise, with humility, that we are part of field and jointly responsible for what is being co-created at any moment.

This intersubjective view seems to be very close to the humility, love and acceptance at the heart of spiritual connection described above, as in Wheeler's (2006) "the one and the many". The risks here though are, as Philippon (1995 & 2001) has argued, that in seeing the self as being so deeply co-created and field defined, the existential nature of contact, with its choice and responsibility, gets diminished in favour of exploring the wider field, and ground, as the way to support increased awareness, integration and growth.

But choice and responsibility for our choices, (in terms of ownership, rather than "responsibility") are surely central to our lives. For the existentialists' (Sartre 1948), Spinelli 1989) we have an existential responsibility to choose truth rather than fantasy, to choose awareness rather than un-awareness. It seems to me that the really hard task in this 'game' is to get past our introjected morality, so that we are left with our more "organic" choices at an existential

level. Perls' (1969) wonderfully demonstrated this with his fierce determination not to be dictated to by his "top-dog".

But this is also what makes psychotherapy such a difficult, dangerous, and life and death process. Where there is much pain, we don't want to face it, and may have spent our whole lives struggling to keep it at bay. The forces involved can be very powerful, yet even in the most difficult situations there must still be some choice, at an existential level, about awareness. Lefevre (2010) sees this in even in her most psychotic patients, the struggle between the part of them that wants health and the part that wants madness and hates health.

Going 'through the fire' and staying with the process can be incredibly tough, but also profoundly growthful. In the end we have the choice to face the pain or not. Often, I think, this takes the form not wanting the negative consequences that come from continued avoidance of facing 'reality' or 'truth'. When I am depressed, do I carry on suppressing my awareness, for which there are many negative consequences, or can I, with patience, awareness and forgiveness allow the meaning of what is happening to emerge?

This shows how choice and responsibility operate fundamentally at the level of awareness more than anything else. In one way this is obvious, as without awareness, there can be no choice or responsibility. But as I understand this, it applies to all our choices, at all levels, at every moment; it is awareness that informs them.

It is this paradox between choice and no-choice that makes Gestalt Therapy such a ongoing challenge, there is no 'right' or 'wrong' answer, no formula, and this is why Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan (2007) say,

"... becoming a Gestalt therapist is such a demanding and challenging path." (p.18)

At every moment with a client there are choices around support and challenge, but life is much too complex and 'chaotic' for any right and wrong answers. What Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan (2007) discuss is how it is only through embodying our own presence or 'being', that we can trust our creativity to find a satisfactory solution to this paradox. This is because presence is, albeit temporarily, a moment of 'enlightenment' where both support and challenge can be held fluidly and creatively. From here it is possible to challenge with more awareness and less risk of it being a reaction or projection. With this challenge then becomes a movement towards openness and expansion, rather than criticism. Similarly in presence, we can support with less risk of unaware counter-transference or confluence undercurrents. With presence challenge can be support and support can be challenge.

In presence the differences between the above perspectives within Gestalt therapy theory dissolve. The differences simply reflect the nature of the paradox that our 'separateness' causes.

## Love in Therapy

Yontef's (1993) and Wheeler's (2006) arguments about the need for empathy and attunement and the need for support, about co-creation and being "of the field", are necessary and important; there is no going back to the arrogance of the "boom-boom" style of the sixties and seventies. But the most important part of this recognition, to me, is that there can be no judgement or blame for not choosing awareness. As therapists we know that blame and judgement are projective phenomena. This is part of the mystery and paradox around choice and responsibility which the "intersubjectivist" approach seems to instinctively understand. The spiritual level of presence confirms this by understanding how the world is only as it is, here and now, unfolding the only way it can.

This opens up the other aspect that the spiritual perspective that is relevant to therapy, that is Love. Above we saw how the spiritual perspective seemed to have three aspects reflecting, mind, heart and body and have looked in some detail at how presence, or embodied presence, relates to Gestalt therapy. Here it seems is where Love relates to our practice as therapists. The experience of integration, of the resolution of our internal conflicts in “full-contact” or ‘development’, brings with it the opening of our hearts. Here confusion and judgement can be let go of, and replaced, as Wheeler (2006) describes above in “the one and the many” with “profound acceptance, and the source of love”.

Love is an essential part of this connection to the “fertile void”, of our “Ground of Being”, something that Kolodny (2004) expressed it like this,

“Consciousness cures and heals not in virtue simply of its being perception or a movement of the body towards the world, but because it is informed by love. This is the love that precedes knowledge, that is given with primordial contact and which is awakened in the heart of the client by a therapist who brings her own open-heartedness to the session.” (p.24-25)

Kornfield (2000) describes so well how the awareness of “I am”, of embodied presence alone can be cold and harsh without the warmth of compassion and love that comes from the opening of our hearts. This can only come from healing our splits, integrating heart, head and body into a freer whole. Love emerges from undoing the chains of our unmet needs as discussed above. It is always there patiently waiting for the blocks to be removed so it can flow (please see G. Herbert poem in the appendix). I know that my presence is fullest when it incorporates all these three parts.

## Phenomenology, Gestalt and Presence

Bloom (2009) in investigating Husserl's Phenomenology and its relationship to Gestalt therapy say that Gestalt does not simply take the phenomenological stance of trying to return to and stay with the experiential data and attend to figure/ground emergence, it goes further.

He says that, Gestalt therapy is achieved by the self using an “as if” ... by “doubling back” (p.281) onto itself with its “natural attitude”, which is our “default” way of living with its focus on the world as we find it, “naive” and “ordinary”. He describes Husserl's question of,

“how can science – or psychotherapy – reliably get beyond naive experience if it is embedded within the very world it is studying?” (p. 283)

He describes Husserl's method as,

“a series of reductions (Bracketing or Epoche) to extract consciousness from the naive, mundane world, and achieve a transcendental consciousness (and intentionality) ... in order to discover universal essences.” (p.283 my first brackets)

That how, after this “Epoche”, our relationship to the world is very different,

“We can now know the constitutive nature of consciousness. Consciousness now functions transcendently, composed of both the object ... and the object as intended within consciousness. ... a person can be ... conscious of being conscious” (p.284)

He goes on to say how Husserl says,

“consciousness unifies sensation and perception: “The lived-body is constantly there ... an entire system of compatibly harmonising organs of perception, the lived body is in itself ... the perceiving-lived body” Consciousness is embodied consciousness.” (p. 284)

All this fits very well with the exploration of consciousness and presence above. Bloom also discusses the “intentionality” in Husserl's understanding of consciousness, which corresponds well with the ideas above of consciousness wanting to become conscious and how our choices at the level of awareness are a part of this.

Bloom (ibid) describes how after “epoche”, (or achieving “presence” in terms of this essay) the therapist and client then “double-back” to give attention to current experience of the clients’ “natural attitude” in order to enable the seeing and understanding of the emergent figure/ground phenomena.

I think his review illustrates well my thesis here, of how the process of integration into presence is an essential aspect of Gestalt therapy, and also part of the process of consciousness becoming conscious of itself.

## Conclusion

So what does ‘spiritual’ mean for Gestalt therapy? I hope I’ve shown how the spiritual can be seen as an integral part of “full-contact” and how this is essentially the same as presence. How the here and now is a ‘portal’ into presence and the “fertile void”, which is an essential aspect of spirituality. How the spiritual is in the I-Thou of real meeting, and in our relationships and in the “ground of being” that underpins the profoundly interdependent field conditions of our existence, (the “one and the many”, Wheeler 2006). Several writers here have argued that the spiritual experience of “transcendent” presence, (Kepner 1996. Also as in meditation, Naranjo 1993) can be a real support for people in “holding” the pain of their trauma.

I hope I have shown how Gestalt therapy sits within the wider context of the force within human experience towards awareness, consciousness and love. How the developmental perspective of our journey, of self-integration, is an expression of this force. Whether this force is a ‘cosmic’ phenomena or not, matters less in the end, than how it reflects a real need within us all. How from this awareness our sense of meaning can emerge more and more clearly along the road towards ever more presence as we let go of our self’s attachment to our separateness.

As Naranjo, Wolfert, Wheeler, Kolodny, Kennedy and PHG have all argued, the spiritual is the natural extension of the work of therapy. Gestalt therapy gives a theoretical framework, and practical path for effective ‘ego repair’, for healing our split nature, for healing of our need for ‘illusion’, with all the onion layers of protection that makes up our “character” and that keep us split and separate. But because Gestalt’s theory and method are informed and infused by the spiritual qualities described above, it seems to me that it can also be very supportive of our parallel, or subsequent, spiritual journey. A journey towards some degree of enlightenment (given the impossibility of any absolutes), which is towards increasing our freedom from personal conditioning and the paradoxes that arise inescapably from experiencing ourselves as separate from the world. This is towards letting go of the self itself, of our fundamental subject / object split, into living increasingly connected to the ‘void of now’ with its quantum nature, presence, consciousness, embodied energy, love and compassion.

I return to Naranjo’s (1993) statement that “awareness is transpersonal ... or spiritual” and hope I have managed to shed a little more light on this. Including something of how awareness is an integral part of our existential choice around opening and connecting to the meaning of our lives. How awareness is intimately connected to the integration of the three basic aspects of our functioning, head, heart and body. Also, how each of these different perspectives colour our experience of the spiritual differently, with the “I am” awareness of the mind, the energy of our physically embodied presence, and the opening of our hearts to love and compassion.

Writing this essay and finding the clarity I have, has given me a greater sense of hope. Meaning has emerged more clearly, as well as a trust in the way that the process of developing awareness through therapy is part of the creative and loving directionality inherent in ourselves and the Universe.

Illness and healing as a cosmic process – lost and found – learning how to connect to the divine,  
to consciousness

Words 15,886 - refs 1430 = 14,456

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## Appendix

Love by George Herbert 1593-1632

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LOVE bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,  
    Guilty of dust and sin.  
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack  
    From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning  
    If I lack'd anything.

'A guest,' I answer'd, 'worthy to be here:'  
    Love said, 'You shall be he.'  
'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,  
    I cannot look on Thee.'  
Love took my hand and smiling did reply,  
    'Who made the eyes but I?'

'Truth, Lord; but I have marr'd them: let my shame  
    Go where it doth deserve.'  
'And know you not,' says Love, 'Who bore the blame?'  
    'My dear, then I will serve.'  
'You must sit down,' says Love, 'and taste my meat.'  
    So I did sit and eat.