

Chasing Rainbows: In Search of Wonder in Gestalt Therapy*

*Inseguendo gli arcobaleni: alla ricerca della meraviglia
nella terapia della Gestalt*



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Abstract

In a world marked by acceleration and dispersion, the aesthetic experience of wonder risks being lost. This article explores how gestalt therapy – particularly as developed within the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy (NYIGT)—offers a clinical and philosophical response to this fragmentation. Drawing on field theory, the temporal sequence of contacting, and the aesthetic of perception, I propose that wonder arises when we linger with experience, allowing novelty to emerge from the ordinary. Through metaphor, clinical reflection, and phenomenological inquiry, I argue that contacting is not merely a therapeutic technique but a rhythmic, aesthetic process that reenchants our engagement with the world. Wonder, like a rainbow, beckons us forward—not as a goal to be grasped, but as a promise sensed in the momenta of contacting.

Keywords: Acceleration, Aesthetic, Contacting, Wonder, Taking-time.

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Biographical notes of the author at the end of this essay.

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1. The Rainbow Metaphor

My theme is “Chasing Rainbows: in search of wonder in gestalt therapy”. As William Wordsworth wrote in 1802, “My heart leaps up when I behold a rainbow in the sky”. I am always looking for something. Why can’t I find it? Socrates would have said, why can’t I find what I am looking for? It is simple, if you found it, you wouldn’t be looking for it. You always look for something you don’t yet have. This is a process of discovery. I am attracted to this process, without the true expectation that I will find something to satisfy my search. I chase rainbows, with rainbows as the paradigm for wonder, the elusive experience whose promise draws us forward.

Rainbows are the visible play of sunlight and rain. I can’t tear my eyes away from them. They hang in the sky, at the horizon that always shifts the closer I get. They fascinate. They are beautiful. We can’t rush to them. No matter how fast I can be, they are always there, beckoning and beyond my reach. A rainbow is a gesture of the world to us. It is the symbol of hope – a promise that the storm has ended and sunlight just beginning to pierce through the clouds. Hope. And light. They are the aesthetic promise—the felt and sensed promise – that the rain is ending. It is not an understatement that we in this world at this time need the rainbows of hope, promise, and sunlight more than ever.

2. The Problem: Acceleration and Dispersion

But there is a problem. Days follow days as if in a blur. Days follow day as if the earth’s rotation has sped up. It is hard to grab hold of what matters. And what matters seems fragile or stretched thin by the pace of things. What is important in the morning is gone by the evening. The earth as if slips from under our feet. Critical sociologists (Baumann, 2000; 2013; Rosa, 2013: 2019) have noted our increasing sense of acceleration. That we can’t keep up with things. We rush from one new thing after another as soon as we find what was new it becomes dull and unsatisfying. Blame this on mass media and instantaneous news and entertainment. Something has to be blamed. But blaming is just complaining to deaf ears and is useless when things are beyond the possibility of being changed.

We can’t catch up. And time itself is not only accelerated. It is dispersed. (Han, 2017) Scattered. Our rushed minutes don’t add up to meanings that might hold them together. Life is dizzying and chaotic. Democracies come and go. Borders are drawn and erased. Wars as desperate impulsive grabs for meaning destroy our sense of home, turn us into migrants, refugees – people

threatened by this dispersion. Acceleration thins experience, desensitizes and dilutes the aesthetic of living. Dispersion fragments, turns the whole into fractured parts and shuts us down to wonder. We see this in our clinical practices as people whose sensitivities are numbed and who are as if beaten down by this chronic chaos seek our help. No, this is not new. Yes, it happened before in history. Yet this is the situation handed to us for us to live-through. It is ours. Right now.

3. Gestalt Therapy's Response: Contacting and Wonder

We can try to understand this anew. Try to chase that rainbow of possibilities in a world reenchanting by the aesthetic of contacting ((Bloom, 2003; Francesetti, 2015; L. Perls, 1992; F. Perls *et al.*, 1994; Spagnuolo Lobb, 2018) which can deepen our experience, give us renewed access to meaning, and slow us down. To get there I will cross the landscape of contacting. Survey it. For when we distill gestalt therapy down to its core, what do we find but contacting itself. And when we open this very notion of contacting and look for its vitality, its heart, what do we find but our curiosity, our interest, the heat of each moment reaching for the next. A chasing of rainbows. Curiosity transformed into wonder. And for all this, we need to take our time. I will explain.

I understand the core NYIGT approach as a thought-line refined over our 75 years: field, sequence of contacting, self structures/functions, and the aesthetic of contacting. Surely, gestalt therapy is more than this. Some might say it is less than this. I will clarify these themes in a bit. Each of these themes compose one whole within which we find and we create novelty through a process of desire, interest, curiosity – and toward wonder. Our human experience spans the arc from the unaware through the aware and even further, toward the not yet aware. The next draws us from what was to what is and to what is next (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013). We dream forward to the future from this present enriched with our lived-past. A rainbow is future we reach toward and experienced in the present as wonder – as awe, as the sublime. We come upon it by surprise, always as surprise. The 19th century poet William Blake found infinity in a grain of sand or eternity in an hour. This is extraordinary. But actually, our work as gestalt therapist is to discover the extraordinary from within the ordinary, to turn the insignificant into the significant, to find that infinity in a grain of sand. And we do this in contacting – that shines forth with the aesthetic spectacle of the world – as the French phenomenologist of perception Merleau-Ponty described the world appearing in our raw, unfiltered perception (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). We find that infinity

in the resonant harmonics of our words and in the gestural ballet of our being with one another. We find it as we pause to let experience emerge, rather than force it forward.

Gestalt therapy has always understood contacting as experiencing novelty, the not-me – and the cannot-be-me. We move toward what draws us to it. But we need to slow down, let each moment gather from the last rather than be dispersed, and be open to wonder as the rainbow, the promise, toward which we reach. This is in our theory of self process and function in terms of its sequence and in its always as an embedded sense of the situation as the basis for contacting itself. To linger with one another. To abide or dwell with one another. To slow down to the pace of the forming self. How do we do this? This is a hint: Let us take a few moments and feel your pulse. Pay attention its rhythm and move in time with it. Then change your movement so you are moving out to time with it. Notice the aesthetic of your own tempo.

4. Theoretical Foundations

The theoretical foundation supporting our chase for rainbows is based on my understanding of Gestalt therapy as developed through decades of practice at the NYIGT. This is my understanding and not the doctrine of the institute. I will move through this quickly.

Our approach rests on several pillars: field theory, the contact-boundary, the sequence of contacting, self as function and process, and – perhaps most distinctively – the aesthetic of contacting. I've developed some of these themes in greater detail elsewhere. In our original formulation, contacting emerges from the organism-environment field – a dynamic unified whole where organism and environment meet, and the figure/ground process of gestalt emergence is possible. Some of us have expanded this in phenomenological directions toward the lifeworld, the world of life, the lived world of experience (Bloom, 2019). The contact-boundary is another aspect of the approach. This elusive concept marks the place from which the figure/ground process emerges. In some ways, it is the birthplace of contacting. It remains continuous throughout contacting. Our always available ground. Contacting is the process of our being in touch with the world. With what is not-me. It proceeds over a continuum from the unaware, to the aware and conscious, and, of course to meeting the other – material, immaterial, thing – and human (Bloom, 2016, 2019). Contacting proceeds even to the not yet sharply aware that are mere hints at the edges of the horizon – the unseen seen, the unheard heard, the silent invisible hints of what might be next (Bloom, 2021). This is a process of moving, sensing, feeling, doing, and knowing – rainbow of our wonder.

4.1. Self as Function and Process

We always have to stress: Self is not a thing. It is more a verb than a noun. We have no easy way to put this into words, although “selfing” has been proposed by some. To my taste, that word is unnecessarily awkward. It gets stuck on my tongue and stings my ears. Other people reject self and replace it with sense of self. This makes sense. Yet it is redundant – and, to me, it tries to clarify by complicating. Self is the organization and organizing of contacting processes into three structures or functions: the id or it function, the ego or I function, and the personality function. These are not things, but proposed descriptors of qualities and functions of experience. Briefly: The id function is our felt sense of the situation. The it of the situation (J.-M. Robine, 2011). The ego function is our agency. The I. Our doing, finding, making, choosing and so on. The personality function is our response to the question. “Who are you?” – the framework of our identities, our history, and our accumulated knowledge. Self process is another way of understanding the temporal sequence of contacting (F. Perls *et al.*, 1994). And this is crucial to what I am proposing today. Today, I want to focus on two elements that form the foundation for our chasing wonder – the temporal sequence of contacting, and the aesthetic of contacting. Again, these are two central notions in my understanding of the NYIGT’s contribution. And central to my theory, practice, and clinical effectiveness.

4.2. The Temporal Sequence of Contacting

The sequence of contacting. And here lies the temporality of contacting. It is a process that flows in time – and with time. Our experience expands or contracts, takes its own time. The experience of contacting’s temporality is not measured in seconds, minutes, or hours. But as the experience of passage. Of moving from a then to a next through a now. A sequence. Not a cycle. Nothing repeats. A sequence that flows as time itself. As St Augustine famously said. Everyone knows what time is yet no one can say what it is. Time: when we understand contacting as a process, we are embracing the sequence of contacting. Not a moment. Not a dot. Not a single note. But a moment as a beat in the pulse of time. A dot as a moment on a line. A note without a sequence it would be merely a sound – and not music. A sequence is our intentionality of contacting (Bloom, 2020) – our yielding with, pushing against, reaching for, grasping onto, pulling toward, and releasing from as Ruella Frank my friend and fellow gestalt therapy clinical phenomenologist describes (Frank, 2023). There is no static instant in the course of the living

present that is framed by the living past and our dreaming toward the lived future. The sequence of contacting proceeds through fore-contacting in which our felt sense of the situation, or id functioning merges into awareness, proceeding to contact itself as we act in the world and become in touch with its otherness (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2016). This is the ego, functioning. We move toward what we need, away from what we don't want. Contacting continues to final and post contacting in which we assimilate novelty. This simplification cries out for elaboration – a cry I will resist to maintain my focus on the search for wonder. But I will say this: while it may sound as if I laid-out a schematic step by step process, this is not so.

Contacting is fluid and while it seemingly moves toward its goal, it is much more like the waves of the sea than an arrow shot towards its target. Think of overlapping flows. Think of ebbing and flowing. Our impulse to condemn and imprison living-experiences to discrete and fixed things is irresistible. This sequence is temporality itself. That is, the phenomena of time.

The sequence can be rushed or crushed, but not without consequences for our capacity for discovering wonder. It can be accelerated and we can give short shrift to our felt sense of the world in fore-contacting. It can be crushed so that we lose our sensitive presence – our being open to the sights, sounds, and resonances of what is around us. Consider our patients: depressive experiences in which time as if stands still; anxious experiences in which the future is crammed into a suffering and breathless present. Consider the flatness and disconnection of personality disorders: the chaos and havoc of the confused storms of experiencing. Id, ego, and personality functioning of self lose vitality, lose their sense of direction, their orientation. We skip over the enrichment of being engaged with one another and our world in common. Contacting, then, has its own time. You and I have our own time. We find time in our contactful enjoyments with one another. We make time when we allow ourselves to be in touch – contacting – the pulse of each moment.

4.3. The Aesthetic of Contacting

The French phenomenologist of perception Merleau-Ponty referred to the spectacle of the world of our perception (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). This is a grand way of expressing the way the world appears to us as the aesthetic of contacting. The aesthetic of this spectacle is another principal lynch pin of the NYIGT perspective. Our founders were committed to this perspective. Fritz Perls was involved with expressionist theater and art in his formative years. Paul Goodman was arguably as much a poet and writer as he was one of the writers of Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, *Gestalt Therapy Excitement*

and Growth, our founding text. I was told by those who knew Paul that William Wordsworth was his favorite poet. And Laura. Her background in dance and music infused her approach. I remember arriving at her door for one of her groups. I entered her living room and she barely looked up as I stood there, embraced by the music and the aesthetic atmosphere of that room, as she played Schubert on her Bechstein piano. So it comes as no surprise when we find in our founding text references to the aesthetic criterion of contacting. Or to hear Laura say time and again that gestalt therapy is an aesthetic approach. On these aesthetic terms, the sequence of contacting flows with a rhythm, harmony, kinesthetic grace, and clarity – which are sensed and felt. These aesthetic qualities reflect the richness of contacting. The more certain the rhythm, the more the parts of experience harmoniously cohere, the more the flow emerges in natural grace, and the sharper the figure, the greater sense of self and connection with the world. And here is where the temporal sequence of contacting shows its relevance again. The more the temporal flow is disrupted, the dimmer the felt and sensed aesthetic will be.

The aesthetic of contacting cannot be rushed or accelerated without stretching it thin. Desensitization. Or worse. Let me make this tangible: take a moment. Consider what happens when we hold our breath. We disrupt your fundamental way of being in touch with the world. The lack of air triggers anxiety. And we might get dizzy. Lightheaded. We imposed an artificial rhythm onto one of the fundamental rhythms of our being. Think now of that rainbow hanging in the sky: coming from nowhere and as if pausing in the air before it slowly fades and fades and fades to leave its memory imprinted on the sky. Frail. Fleeting. Or think of who you are – the thriving embodiment of your past toward your future and certain death. The aesthetic of experience is almost defined by its impermanence. Without this, how else could we experience wonder? Or would we even care? Like you and me, wonder is a frail experience.

5. Wonder and the Extraordinary

What, then, is wonder? In one of his seminars, Isadore From, a significant voice at the NYIGT, once referred to gestalt therapy as a psychotherapy of the ordinary. He went on to characterize our practices as “trivial”. That annoyed many of us. But connotation of pointlessness notwithstanding, he didn’t mean unimportant. He provocatively told us to pay attention to the small, the ordinary, the seemingly unimportant. When we do this, we are making possible the transformation of the ordinary into the extraordinary. I push this further. The extraordinary is what is novel and, certainly, this is

central to contacting. Contacting is a process of engagement of our interest with the world. It often involves curiosity. Fascination. What if the novel we are in touch with exceeds our capacity to grasp it? To comprehend it? To take its weight and measure? What happens when the aesthetic of contacting, the felt and sensed figure, overwhelms? Now we are in the realm of the sublime, awe. This is wonder – of a world that refuses to be categorized or reduced to understandable parts. As wonder, this world beckons beyond itself. It points us to a place to which we can never go, a destination we can never reach. Laura Perls once said to me that the suffering of a couple is their mutual attempt to turn their significant otherness into insignificant sameness. Its effect is to dampen any possibility of surprise or delight or wonder in the relationship (Polster, 2021). To turn the delicate subtleties of love into the aching dullness of the commonplace. It turns the spontaneity of a caress into a clutching grip. This was a flattening of the aesthetic of their relationship – the extraordinary into the level terrain of the ordinary.

6. Lingering: *Verweilen*

When we step back and allow the aesthetic temporality of contacting to be present, we allow for lingering. It is neither passive nor active. Not directionless yet not sharply aimed at any goal. Neither hurried nor slow. It is in its own time. We linger, we stroll. *Verweilen*. I borrow *Verweilen* from the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, whose laser attention to our being-in-the-world is staggering (Heidegger, 1962; 1971). He proposed that in order for things to show themselves to us as what they are as they are, we need to linger with experience: To let being, be. Some time ago, I went to the Munich Staatsoper with Renate Perls, Fritz and Laura's daughter. It was my first time to that opera house. History was as if wet paint on the walls of its grand staircase. I walked through that space while chattering to a friend. Renate turned to me and with her famous harshness said, not softly, "Will you shut up and look around!" She commanded me to stop, to pause: *Verweilen*. This opening, this pause is the portal to wonder. I looked around at the polished marble staircase, at the gilt ceiling, and breathed in an atmosphere fragrant with all I found overwhelming in the music I was about to hear. Richard Wagner's *Tannhäuser*. And one of the best performances I can recall. Wonder. With lingering, with *Verweilen*, self remains fluid and responsive. All it takes is for us to pause. And in this interval let come to being what will be. We draw acceleration to a halt and gather our moments from their dispersion.

Wonder emerges in this fluidity. Interest and curiosity develop further

into the dizziness of wonder. This is excess as if at the edges of self functioning. We are no longer active agents in the world. We are not passive.

Rather, we are responsive as our hearts leap up to see rainbows in the sky or with the eyes of a Vincent van Gogh to uncover wonder in the starry night.

Dan Bloom: LCSW is a psychotherapist, supervisor, clinical trainer, and writer in New York City. He studied with Laura Perls, Isadore From and Richard Kitzler. Dan is affiliated with the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy, has been guest and adjunct faculty at gestalt therapy institutes worldwide. He has spoken and given workshops at many international conferences. He leads webinars in gestalt therapy and phenomenology. He is president and Fellow of NYIGT and past president of IAAGT. He is a member and accredited supervisor of EAGT. Dan is co-founder of the International Study Group on Field-Emergent Self and Therapy. He is an associate editor of the *Gestalt Review*, on the scientific board of *Quaderni di Gestalt/Gestalt Therapy Journal* and a member of the Scientific Board of the *Gestalt Therapy Book Series*. He was editor-in-chief of the journal, *Studies in Gestalt Therapy: Dialogical Bridges*. Dan is widely published.

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