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A response to Robert Resnick – 'when "Other" is less than...'

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Dear Editor,

I was affected by the passion and clarity of Robert Resnick's piece: 'When "Other" is less than...' (British Gestalt Journal, 11, 1, p64). I agree with him about the way that an 'us' and 'them' world brings about conflict, loss and death, and that nowadays this is being brought forth in frightening doses – as we see when we open our newspapers or live with its consequences in the streets. The difficulty for me lies in finding a stance that does not incorporate the problem.

When Resnick describes various people as 'monumentally arrogant', the world continues to increase its quota of 'us and them' ness rather than making the subtle move to somewhere more complete. It is no help that we Gestaltists espouse dialogue and field theory and phenomenology if we only apply it selectively, and treat ourselves to being judgemental when it suits the 'us' in us. In my eyes that's just what perpetuates the problem. The phenomenological approach encourages us to see without intent or investment, in wholes, to go beyond the partial viewpoints that are all that any ego-based perspective can deliver. It is a kind of spiritual discipline, perhaps not possible for more than short bursts, but it seems to me to be the only place to work from as we address deep divides and dangerous conflicts of passion in the world.

From my reading of history, prehistory and anthropology, fighting outsiders (however defined) has been part of the life of all human communities. Humans are 'hard-wired' to make these distinctions, and there is no evidence of any long-term community having been totally peaceful. Gestalt theory can show what happens – e.g. the polarising process, the identifications – and it also, as Resnick points out, has a view of the unity of the organismic / environmental field that must be the proper starting point for any kind of understanding and action in depth. We can also helpfully support real contact, real meeting between people, that which penetrates our stereotyping tendencies. So far, however, we Gestalt practitioners know more about how to get small groups of people together than whole peoples – ethnic or national entities. Something different seems to happen to us when we are part of larger groups. What brings resolution in a small context often perpetuates it in a larger one. Vengeance, for example, functions to keep individuals linked, and can even be used creatively. But in a larger context it perpetuates and extends tragedy. In Ireland, history is very much alive, right

back to events in the times of Oliver Cromwell. The more one side fights for atonement, the more people who are innocent are drawn in and die, on both sides. Retaliation between Israel and Palestine has done nothing for the peace process. Both sides feel righteous. Acting in good conscience seems to bring this feeling of righteousness and virtue regardless of consequences.

As Resnick says, varying populations have always been demonised, rendered into 'somethings' rather than 'someones'. History is written by the victors, so our definition of what is good comes to depend on the brute force of circumstances, later woven into complex justifications. Populations can be hurt, attacked, exterminated even, without conscience, or rather in good conscience. Pioneer Americans fought Indians in a way that many are now ashamed of, just as Australians and New Zealanders, not to mention British colonial forces, attacked native peoples and now feel the burden of consequence. So conscience is no guide to good and evil in larger contexts. It keeps changing.

I have found Bert Hellinger's (1998) insights into conscience very helpful, having learned from him to see its literal function as merely to protect membership, and thereby to create divides. Hellinger suggests that our conscience repetitively asks the single question: is this person or group one of us or one of them? Near the boundaries of what our particular group permits, we tend to feel increasingly anxious and guilty, and correspondingly innocent when our behaviour orientates us to the heart of our reference group, whatever it values. Since we are all members of so many different groups with differing value systems, this means that guilt and innocence belong together in us. (A tiny example: as I sit writing this I feel innocent with regard to my membership of this journal and simultaneously guilty with regard to my family, from whom I have removed myself in order to write this.)

Hellinger has also helped me to see that all systems, whether they are families, businesses or nations, are maintained by some kind of collective conscience, to which participating members, whether they recognise it or not, are loyal. It functions as a collective pressure, especially on the weakest members of the group – the children and foot soldiers. They are the ones who act to complete the whole, maintaining the integrity of the group even at great cost to themselves and others. There is no more dramatic example of this than the suicide bombers who turn out, nearly all of them, to be young and willing to sacrifice themselves for the ideals of their community. They carry the history of what has not been completed or atoned, of injustices, of un-mourned levels of death and destruction suffered. The different peoples that make up the country of Yugoslavia never forgot their own identity and history during the long years of Tito's rule. Their old grievances and needs, their losses and memories of atrocities and injustices, were passed on down the generations. Young soldiers are always willing to die to bring justice for what was committed generations before.

So for me, the question is what can support our individual and collective capacity to rise above this kind of conscience, to feel part of a greater whole, a greater good? We are destined to remain bigoted if we stay within the limitations of any particular group, even a Gestalt one that feels righteous about how arrogant it is to create divides. People always feel guilty when they have to tear themselves away from the simple loyalties of their reference group. It seems to be an inevitable accompaniment to setting forth to attend to something larger. Whilst religions have moral codes that go beyond the smaller group they too stop short somewhere along the continuum – including the faithful but not the non-believers, humanity but not the animal kingdom, animals but not the planet as a whole or the universe. How do we learn to connect to these larger wholes? It requires a vertical movement, and it seems that those who have managed it describe the process as a deeply personal and spiritual experience.

In Britain, we are not finding it easy to think of ourselves as European, and the European community finds it difficult to open its boundaries to various countries that don't yet seem to be European enough. Being part of the Muslim world or the Christian world now overrides national boundaries. What kind of creative and transformational process would encourage us to be part of humanity, first and foremost? What would guide us through the partial losses that would be the inevitable accompaniment, if resources were more fairly distributed in the world? What sort of combination of personal development, consciousness work, spiritual and political forces, creativity, healing skills, and understanding of social and systemic reality would make a significant difference? Perhaps we need a larger guiding map than Gestalt can offer, or we need to enlarge the application of the maps we have.

Resnick points out that we are doomed to cyclical repetitions if we fail to attend to the ground that creates the levels of impotent rage that fuel the world's many brands of terrorism. I agree wholeheartedly. We need to unravel and understand the loyalties and systemic pressures operating on each faction within a conflict. It is laborious, requiring us all to register the myriad forces that have coalesced into the current situation, actively honouring all who have suffered or disappeared from view, weeping and mourning together, respecting the deep values that give people their identities, and thereby responding with all our collective resources to support reconciliation.

References

Hellinger, B., Weber, G., and Beaumont, H. (1998). *Love's Hidden Symmetry*. Zeig and Tucker, Arizona, USA.

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