

In Transition: Autism through a Gestalt Therapy Lens

My paper is named “In Transition” for two reasons. The first is that we are going through a period of transition with regard to how we understand autism, and how we include autistic people in the conversation around research and treatment; the second reason is that this paper focuses on autistic teenagers and the transition they make into contemporary autistic adulthood.

I hope to convey with clarity the changes going on in the field. And I invite you to ask me questions at lunchtime today, if you would like to. Please feel free to approach me.

In 2007, a thirteen-year-old mute, autistic boy from Japan, Naoki Higashida, used a device called an alphabet board to write a best selling book entitled *The Reason I Jump*. It was a revolutionary presentation in which he explains why he engages in a range of quiniestentially autistic activities which neurotypicals may not understand. He needed physical help from carers to use his alphabet board; and thus his authorial achievement is a product of relationship.

Relationship is one of the underlying qualities appreciated by psychologist Antonio Narzisi in his many articles, including *Autismo e psicoterapia della Gestalt: un ponte dialogico possibile*, which was published in the journal Quaderni di Gestalt in 2015.

Gestalt therapy is my modality. I have practiced it in New York City for 29 years. As Dr. Laura Perls, co-founder of Gestalt therapy said, “Gestalt therapy is existential, experiential and experimental.” In Gestalt therapy, we are phenomenological, as Laura’s word “experiential” indicates. We work with the whole of a human being – Gestalt means “whole” in German – with attention to the physical and social field. We never look at the person apart from her field, and consider the field to be part of the person. Hence, the idea of “relationship” is ever-present in Gestalt therapy practice. Interventions are seen as experiments, whose outcomes may point the way toward the next possible goal, without judgment or shaming. We look at what IS rather than what anyone believes SHOULD BE. That is the essence of phenomenology.

In Francesca Happé’s brilliant book *Autism*, was republished in 2019, updated with co-author Sue Fletcher-Watson, each

chapter is concluded with an essay written by a member of the autistic community. Here is a brief excerpt from one such essay. It is by Dr. Claire Evans-Williams, who is autistic, “One conclusion may be that it is not advantageous to presume that the essence of Autistic-ness can be captured and reduced to a single unitary psychological theory...the narrow and finite dimensions of psychological theory cannot speak to the magnitude of autistic heterogeneity...the human-ness of autistic people (and their families, friends and carers) transcends anything a theory has to offer.” While Dr. Williams is not a Gestalt therapist, her openness in looking to the field in finding effective ways to work with autistic patients is very close to the way we in Gestalt therapy practice.

For example, in my own practice right now, I am working with Marge (her name is changed) who is a project manager at a large scientific corporation. In our sessions, I do not insist that Marge refrain from stimming, a set of self-soothing movements, which for her include rocking, scratching her arms and neck, or switching back and forth between several notebooks in which she writes during our sessions.

I ask her what she wants to work on; and her expressed needs are often a variety of social skills. We discuss situations that are confusing her. We brainstorm, we role-play, we develop “rules” for naming and comprehending other people’s behaviors. In this way, we develop together a practical method for emulating Theory of Mind. And we develop ways for personal release when working at Theory of Mind becomes too tiring.

Marge and I have developed a supportive client/therapist relationship which is not, as Dr. Fredrick Perls, co-founder of Gestalt therapy put it, a *top dog/under dog* model. That is because we in Gestalt therapy believe that each client is the expert on her or his own life, and that we therapists are the assistants. This is the kind of compassion and respect which is being asked for now in the complex autistic community of both scientific researchers and autistic self-advocates and their allies.

Whereas in 1987, the field of autism research produced 32 published papers, in 2017 there were more than 4,200. Autistic self-advocacy groups are outspoken about whether the kind of research being carried out is genuinely providing

any real and practical assistance for those who are autistic. In the United States, based upon a law called the Individuals with Disabilities Act, autistic self-advocates are engaging in writing, blogging, organizing conferences, establishing websites, holding rallies and many other activities to try to change the conversation around autism. Many of these self-advocates are young autistic adults who no longer want to be hidden away from society; nor do they want only the experts to speak about or speak for them. This is a transition actively being sought by them at the present time.

The history of how we reached this new phase in working with autistic people and in conducting research on autism, while not part of my topic today, is important to know. The book which best describes this history, in my view, is *NeuroTribes*, written in 2015 by Steve Silberman.

In Silberman's book we are introduced to one of the first outspoken autistic persons, Jim Sinclair, who in 1993 published the groundbreaking essay *Don't Mourn for Us*. He wrote, "Autism is not an appendage. Autism isn't something a person *has*, nor is it a "shell" that a person is trapped inside. There is no "normal" child hidden behind the autism. Autism is a way of

being. It is pervasive. It colors every experience, sensation, perception, thought, emotion and encounter, every aspect of existence.”

My friend John is an educator working with autistic teenagers in a school in London. I asked him what happens to his students when they age out of his program at 16. With sadness he said, “They disappear into the system.” By that he meant that they and their families receive a government stipend which they may choose to apply to a variety of activities: staying at home, attending adult daycare, working in sheltered workshops...or, on the other end of things, studying in college, especially in finding jobs in STEM field - science, technology, math and engineering - possibly marrying and having children. "

For example, another friend’s teenage son Joseph (name changed) studies in the United States at a special college for autistic students, which provides an environment which meets the individual student’s needs while challenging them academically. Joseph is very happy there. He was well prepared for that transition by working at home with his mom

on the activities provided by the Son-Rise Program, whose website describes their effective and humanistic approach.

Perhaps you have heard of the German technology company SAP, with locations in Europe and the United States. They, along with Microsoft, have started a program called Autism at Work, organized to take advantage of the particular skills of high functioning autistic adults. The workplaces are set up to be easygoing for the senses – low lighting, noise-cancelling earphones, caps with eye-shading brims, opportunities to play video games at lunchtime. These autistic employees’ abilities to discern complex patterns, to notice breaks in computer program patterns, to remain interested in repetitive on-screen tasks, to be honest and straight-forward in bringing possible irregularities to their supervisor’s attention. These are valuable employees who are well paid and respected by management. They are forging one possible new road for autistic young adults.

By contrast, one of my distinguished colleague’s fathering and raising an autistic son (names withheld) proved challenging and painful. No school or training program could work with him effectively. His violent behaviors were not understood to be

the results of sensory overload, anxiety and fear. Rather they were regarded as willful recalcitrance and lack of empathy for others – neither of which was true. Finally my colleague had to remove his teenage son from school and teach him at home, where he would not be subjected to shaming and military-style control. He earned a high school diploma at home, he learned to drive and obtained a driver's license. He became active on line and spent many hours there each day. He took up duties in the house, including preparing dinner and cleaning up afterwards. He spends each evening with his father playing games of mechanical skill. They have a loving relationship.

One of the approaches my colleague used in helping his son at home is called *Gentle Enhancement*, a beautiful system of movement and cognitive activities undertaken by parent and child together, and invented by autistic therapist Judith Bluestone. It is described in her book *The Fabric of Autism*, published in 2005.

23-year-old April Herren wrote a chapter for the important book *Loud Hands*, published in 2012. It is a 406-page book of essays entirely written by autistic teenagers and adults. In it, April wrote, "I might have autism, but I'm incredibly bright. I

live independently in my own apartment...(although) the world just isn't prepared to deal with me...I am using facilitated communication to write this." April's being willing to show herself with all her abilities and needs, demonstrates a valuable transition we are all beginning to undergo in modern life – the showing/looking at autism as it is here and now.

I'd like to end my talk by quoting 13-year-old Luke Jackson, author of the book *Freaks, Geeks and Asperger's Syndrome*, which he wrote in 2002. He says, "All you autistic people reading this, remember that just as you want people to try to accept and understand you and your autism, you too should accept and try to understand other people's differences. They can't help it if they don't understand you. It's up to us autistics to teach people about ourselves."

That teaching/learning process is the very heart of what we here today are engaging in together.

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