

Response to Donna Orange' Plenary Address, "My Other's  
Keeper: Resources for the Ethical Turn in Psychotherapy,"  
delivered September 23, 2016

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Italy

Donna asks us,

what forms of responsibility plague all humanitarian  
workers...and how do we keep responding? What  
personal, spiritual, and communal resources nourish us  
as we try to keep responding and living humanly?

And then she leads us through these questions from her own  
perspectives as a gestalt friendly philosophically oriented  
intersubjective psychoanalyst.

Donna's talk was a thoughtful, moving, personal, practical,  
and provocative invitation for me to think some thoughts with you  
in response. I am honored to be a respondent. Donna's talk still  
resonates with me.

Our conference theme directs our attention to the aesthetic of  
the other and to meeting at the boundary of a desensitized world.  
So, first, let's pay some attention to that right now.

You, I, and we are, actually, others to one another.

I am speaking American English -- not most of your native  
language. My words, then, announce my otherness.

We gather as two organizations with two different  
organizational norms and different expectations came together for  
this conference.

We are here from many different countries. There are so  
many people here; and many of you don't know each other.

We are gestalt therapists – all different kinds of gestalt therapists.

Donna is an intersubjective psychoanalyst. Speaking English. Sometimes speaking “psychoanalysis-eze.”

And sometimes speaking Levinasian, Donna characteristically holds her theory lightly and uses abstractions with the lightest of all possible touches.

In these and uncountable other ways, we here are a gathering of others – which right now gives us the direct experience of contacting Donna as other in the aesthetic of otherness at the boundary, the contact-boundary of this conference, which hopefully is an island of sensitivity in a desensitized world.

So... what is your experience? Take just a moment now, a breath, and notice.

As I listened to Donna speak, so much felt right to me.

I experienced a warm hum of familiarity. Donna is my friend, colleague and teacher.

I also noticed that I bumped up against differences -- sort of caught my breath when I heard something I wondered about or think I disagreed with or separated me from what she said.

Familiar and Different. Comfortable and uncomfortable. Peaceful and uneasy.

These are the rhythms of the aesthetic of contacting the other, without which contacting would be a process fading into the mists of confluence, confusion, and misunderstanding.

As gestalt therapists, we know that contacting is contacting some *other*, some not-me – and the other is always disturbing because different.

It is human, all too human, for us to flee from being disturbed; to seek the comfort of familiar friends, food and even of our “mother tongue.”

It is so tempting to close ourselves off from the other.

Yet we know the value of staying in the bumpy process of the full spectrum of sensations in the aesthetic of the other – from the purring pleasures of comfort to the annoying discomfort of confusion: that is, of recognizing similarities and being open to differences.

It was easy to recognize in her message the importance of support for ourselves in our work; and perhaps you translated this for yourselves as the necessity for support for contacting itself – and how essential it is for each of us to be grounded by our communities of colleagues, families, and personal backgrounds.

Donna’s chorus sings a music for her and that we each of must our own music to sing support for us in our work

Such a chorus’s place within the ground in the figure/ground of our professional competence, that organizes and nourishes our personal availability, is different for each of us -- our human need for it is essentially the same.

Our own commitment to the non-hierarchical intrinsic values of contacting showed up in Donna’s discussion of what she referred to as the hermeneutics of trust.

These were easy to recognize, I think, and easy to link to our gestalt therapy.

And we felt along with Donna as she described how she supports her “working with devastated patients, ...humiliated beyond inclusion in human community, [and] working with massive social injustices...” -- for as gestalt therapists we, too, are implicitly drawn to the suffering of others in the larger social field, since, paraphrasing PHG [Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman], no one can be completely happy until there is general happiness.

Relational turn? Ethical turn. We gestalt therapists hear these terms all the time among ourselves. These are words with increasingly powerful meanings to us.

I want to turn now to Donna, Levinas and gestalt therapy.

Maybe this was one of the aspects of Donna’s talk you found difficult to follow.

Gestalt therapists are probably more familiar with the more accessible Buber's language of inclusion and dialogue.

I will wonder if Levinasian ethics has a place in gestalt therapy. To do this, I will try to do a little translation of Levinas and then see if I can apply it to gestalt therapy.

Donna introduces her Levinasian orientation:

My unifying theme is the radical pre-primordial ethics of infinite responsibility to the other person.

Pre-primordial" Think of "pre-primordial" as "before before" everything.

In this Levinasian ethics, we are besieged and persecuted by the Other. There is nothing subtle here.

Our relationship to the other is NOT some benign or benevolent respect for the other's autonomy, but the experience of a responsibility that persecutes. Again, noting subtle.

In Levinas's terms, I am taken hostage by the other. I become and am subject, subjected.

An ethical subject.

More guilty than anyone.

This Levinasian ethical universe echoes Old Testament's Yahweh, God of thunder – and it comes as no surprise that his, Levinas's, ethics is known as a prophetic ethics. This is post-holocaust ethics of demand that demands, calls out, and sets the terms and bursts the limits of what it is to be ethical.

How on earth can this relate to psychotherapy, let alone gestalt therapy?

Donna's clinical brilliance is that she takes this Levinasian mouthful and offers us smaller bites: she makes this specifically relevant to our clinical practice and our concrete being-in-the-world.

In terms of a therapy relationship, we are persecuted by the other's suffering and our guilt takes the shape of our willingness to go along with the other's suffering.

Besieged by the other's trauma we are re-traumatized so that the therapy relationship is a transcendence, a crossing over, from a one person stance to a communication from a one to the other.

A one-person psychology cannot be. It has never been.

"Here I am. I am sub-ject."

I and the other do not do not stand one to the other on even ground, but on an asymmetrical landscape of height, you, the Other above me.

This is what is called the "curvature of intersubjective space."

Donna makes clear: No, this is not surrender, since I, the therapist do not capitulate, but am willing to accompany the patient-other.

Yet, cryptically or even paradoxically, this is more passive than all passivity.

Let me see if I can weave this into our gestalt therapy tapestry.

After the ethical turn in gestalt therapy, we also focused attention on the essential or structural dimensions of the therapy relationship itself.

Therapeutic contacting could no longer be a solitary process of the patient but co-emergent of the contact-boundary of the therapist and patient.

The therapist is co-involved in the figure of suffering of the patient and this involvement is experienced in the aesthetic of contacting shaping the therapy.

The emergent figure includes the reaching of the patient toward the therapist and the therapist's welcoming/receiving presence enfolded within the exercise of the therapist's emergent agency.

“I suffer” calls out the response “I am here.” – then “How can we be together?”

And then --“What can we do together?”

We can even understand self functioning relationally as expressing the ethics of non-indifference -- where an “I” cannot ignore the affective presence of the other.

When the sounds and sights of suffering is the id or it of the situation: we are seized.

As therapists, with our presence and clinical expertise, we shepherd the emergence of the figure of the other’s suffering and are “taken hostage” by the *propulsive intensity of contacting* -- its integration of feelings, actions, sensation, and movement.

When we are engrossed in contacting we are spontaneously drawn along -- choosing and doing are contextualized by the flow of the process.

Gestalt therapists don’t disappear in a haze of passivity, either.

We continue as active agents of the therapy -- after having been “taken hostage” by the suffering of the patient, the suffering at the contact-boundary that insists and persists, persecutes, within the emerging figure of therapeutic contacting.

We never lose a sense of who we are as we willingly chose to participate in the therapy, intervening, suggesting, being-alive-with.

It seems to me that Levinas might have some relevance to gestalt therapy. I could continue weaving Levinas into our contemporary approach to the other, while also showing our differences

Yet *infinite* responsibility? Guilty for all and before all?

I have my limits with Levinas. And my time here is limited too, the limit of which I’ve been told I’ve exceeded.

Thank you, Donna, friend, colleague, -- friend of gestalt therapy -- for this experience of the aesthetic of the other.

