**Gestalt Therapy and Imago Relationship Therapy: an Interface**

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As a Gestalt Therapist, also trained in Imago Relationship Therapy, I am struck by the profound influence of the philosopher Martin Buber on both these theoretical approaches. In 1923, Buber wrote “I-Thou,” a radical essay on the relational nature of existence, postulating that we are always in relation and that the “I” is always affected by, and emerging in relationship to the “thou.” Buber made a distinction between two types of interpersonal relationships, the “I-It”, necessary for survival, in which we use each other to meet pragmatic and emotional needs; and the “I-Thou,” necessary for personhood, in which we have an authentic experience of our partner, understanding and honoring their “otherness,” and attempting to appreciate their experience as well as our own. Buber is most interested in the process of meeting, or the “between.” This is the sacred space that is created between two individuals as they meet at the boundary of contact and attempt to look at and experience the world through the other’s eyes. The essence of gestalt therapy is to maintain our awareness of this space, as we work with our clients. Similarly, the essence of Imago therapy is to teach couples how to become aware of and honor this space, in their ongoing interactions with each other.

Gestalt therapists work toward what Buber calls **inclusion**, the attempt to experience what the client is experiencing, from his/her side of the dialogue; and toward **confirmation**, the acceptance of our client’s feelings and behaviors, and the recognition that they cannot, in any given present moment, be any different than they are. In an attempt to help couples achieve inclusion and confirmation toward a partner, often extremely difficult during those moments when needs or perceptions differ, and/or when childhood feelings are triggered by the actions of a partner, Imago therapy outlines a structured process in which each partner takes turns listening to the other, almost adopting a quasi-therapeutic stance. Rather engaging defensively and reactively, each partner is “heard” by the grace and generosity of the other.

This process is called the Imago Couples Dialogue, and it consists of three processes: mirroring, validation and empathy. **Mirroring** is the process of accurately reflecting back the "content" of a message from a partner. The most common form of mirroring is paraphrasing, a statement of your understanding of the message a partner has sent. It indicates a willingness to transcend your own thoughts and feelings for the moment and attempt to understand your partner from his/her point of view. **Validation** is a communication to the sending partner that the information being received and mirrored "makes sense," indicating that you can see your partner's point of view and can accept its validity—it’s "truth" for the partner. Validation is a temporary suspension or transcendence of your point of view. To validate your partner's message does not mean that you agree with his/her point of view or that it reflects your subjective experience. It merely recognizes the fact that in any communication between two persons, there are always two points of view, and every report of any experience is a subjective way of “seeing” which is the "truth" for each person, sometimes influenced by deep-seated “knowing” or “learning” based on prior (especially early childhood) experiences. It also recognizes that no "objective view" is possible. **Empathy** recognizes the “self” in the other. It is the process of reflecting, imagining or participating in the feelings the sending partner is experiencing about the event or the situation being reported. This deep level of communication attempts to recognize, reach into and, on some level, experience the emotions of the sending partner. This allows both partners to transcend their separateness, even if only for a moment, and to experience a genuine "meeting."

Gestalt Therapy and Imago Relationship Therapy have one other very important thing in common: despite the profound philosophical ground that they both inhabit, they are both very practical. Gestalt Therapy is well known for offering an **“experiment”** at the end of a session, a bit of **“homework”** that allows the client to practice a new attitude or new behavior. Similarly, the last step in the Couples Dialogue is the **Gift/Behavior Change Request**, in which each partner commits to a positive behavior change, one specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-limited action that addresses each partner’s unmet need or desire. Both theoretical approaches recognize that action is just as important as awareness and, in fact, creates the ground for growth, as each person experiences the triumphs or difficulties that emerge in the trying on of new behaviors.