

MALCOLM PARLETT'S 2008 LECTURE QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

Q I was very moved by what you had to say and I was particularly struck with what you said at the beginning about how you apply Gestalt to other areas. My own background is in teaching in schools and now university, and it just really strikes me that we need to change what happens to children in classrooms and how to bring teachers to resonate internally and externally with the children they're working with – that's one of the bottom-up movements that I think is beginning. My research tells me that that's beginning to happen, that head-teachers are beginning to subvert the system and say "look at the SATs, look at the National Curriculum, I want my children to have an inclusive curriculum". And I think that as members of the Gestalt community we have a really important role to play in supporting people who are really embarking on new territory and helping to bring the next generation forward. And I found what you had to say really supportive of where I am and what I'm trying to do in my own work, so thank you.

A I need to say that I feel inspired by what you've just said, and I'm sure that in schools there isn't a top-down solution, that isn't the way to go. The way to go is through passing on the word as you're doing, and practising a different approach, and eventually I think if there are enough things happening eventually a change occurs. What comes to mind when I think of making changes, is how peace eventually came to Northern Ireland. Although obviously there were critical moments like the Good Friday agreement, this could not have been successful had there not been hundreds of very small-scale initiatives first – a move to integrate a primary school here, to dismantle some kind of barrier there, a bit of dialogue going on between some Catholics and Protestants over there, – all this preparation was working on changing the ground until something emerged as a strong figure. And I think that you're talking about the same process. It's a very exciting time to be around.

Q I think it's just that people have had enough; have had enough of being an 'it'; they've had enough of feeling they're being 'done to' and not heard; and they're looking for ways of

feeling more hopeful and more optimistic and more able to put energy into their work. I spoke to forty head-teachers yesterday about my passion and my Gestalt approach to school leadership and what that means, and I was just so heartened by them just saying 'yes, tell us more, this is really interesting'; they were not saying 'oh, this is new age faddy-daddy stuff', they want to know more about the impact of this neuroscience stuff and what's happening to children's brains in classrooms when we shout at them. They want to know more about how we can create a school that doesn't traumatise or re-traumatise young people. Most teachers and school leaders go into the job because they care and they want to make a difference. And because nobody's been caring about them and trying to make a positive difference to them, they've kind of got disillusioned systemically, you know, so it's about how we can co-create a new field, in a way, a new climate for change that will support children and teachers to work together. I feel really the time is right and the teachers' enthusiasm is helping me to feel more hopeful.

A Thank you.

Q I was reminded from your speech and from what the previous speaker has just said that I had the privilege of attending a meeting in London organised by the Ministry for Peace, I think it was called. And it was around the involvement of young people in peace initiatives. And it was a sort of conversation that happened and I felt so moved by a large group of children from one particular school, the name of which I've forgotten, who spoke so freely, who spoke with so much passion about the anti-bullying campaign they were involved in and about peer mediation. And you talking about embodiment could just be about so many of these young people, from I think 10 years upwards...they were so embodied; it was such an inspiration and particularly gave me a lot of hope.

A Your talking about that just reminded me of one of the 15,000 things that I could have added, which was that I think a marvellous example of a shift, an observable and amazing shift – into that place of being expressive and in the body – is evident in a before-and-after test on Al Gore. When he was

Vice-President and when he was a presidential candidate he was described, and appropriately by all accounts, as wooden and unemotional and unable to inspire people. And then, when the film 'The Inconvenient Truth' came along, there he is – passionate, convincing, and congruent. And my guess is that if there was a particular school from which a lot of these kids were coming from, there would be something transmitted probably by one teacher, or maybe a group of teachers. that somehow shifted the whole field for them. So it's a lovely example, thank you, of the effect of being more embodied.

Q I've got reactions from two places. I'll start with my daughter who is at university. She started off with a little group when she was younger called the Little Green People, in Wantage, just the two of them to begin with. And since then she has gone on to climate camps and direct action. I have these powerful conversations about her lifestyle when she comes to stay. But they're talking about – because it's a self-creating organisation – exactly what you describe in terms of it not being top-down, not being hierarchical, but genuinely, truly and openly created in the moment. And there's an acute awareness of the body and of the world they live in. And there's part of me – I mean I'm a child of my time and my upbringing – that does not follow this, but actually what I'm aware of is that she is living in the world in a way that I do not fully understand and there is a part of me which thinks she is wonderful. So I learned from her. And I perceive her through fresh eyes as a result of today which is a gift. So I'll have a different kind of impression when I next see her which is wonderful. The other part is in terms of my work. One of the things that I do in the health service is I work with long-term health conditions. And it seems to me that there is increasing recognition, that you cannot be disembodied in the way we run the system. We just can't because we can't afford it and it doesn't work. So what's happening in terms of management, we're all getting older, we're living longer, we're going to have more health conditions to manage, and what we're noticing is the old methods don't work. Having people manage them medically in extensive teams... there aren't enough, it can't happen, it won't work, and we will become overwhelmed. From my position what I'm seeing is

there is a bottom-up approach about wanting to be out in the community, into schools, talking with children and working at a whole different level of embodiment, and if we don't, the health system in this country is going to break. And I see there's a powerful sea-change happening – it's in its early stages. And I believe that as we actually become more embodied our collective consciousness and our brains will shift. I think what you said is incredibly timely and exciting.

Q Malcolm, of the 15 thousand things you couldn't say because there wasn't time, one of them was standing out for me that's not been in the room. How do you fit war into what you've been saying today?

A Well, what comes to me immediately is that ...I have – well, in fact, two responses. One is that in the five abilities work I see that one of the key qualities to explore in interrelating is the capacity that we have to create 'us' and 'them' divisions which is a universal tendency. And it's something to do with the fact that if I join with somebody I'm creating a sort of little marker in the field automatically in that process, a boundary around us. So that it's absolutely a valid question – an embodied exploration of our capacity to do that is required, and also of our capacity and tendency to hate. But I think we're rather allergic to hatred. And when I've taught 'sentic states', which some of you may remember, the one that's most difficult for a lot of people is to contact their capacity to hate. And war I don't think can proceed without hatred – it's the fuel. So that part of the exploration in a post-Cartesian world that does not separate emotions from the rest of our human experience, is the recognition of the fact that we are all capable of hating, of creating a warlike environment and being oppressive of 'them'. If we notice these things in ourselves, and don't run away from them or deflect from them or desensitise ourselves from experiencing them, we can also begin to claim ownership for them and be aware of their force and also the way that they destroy us while we're actually thinking about destroying the other.

A joke comes to mind – we haven't heard many jokes today. Somebody sent me this: it's a photograph of one of those large notices outside churches in the States, so it's a photo

of a church in Milwaukee or something. And in big letters it says 'Forgive your enemies, it really does their head in'.
(laughter)

- Q I want to clear up a little bit for myself. You said your lecture had two parts. It started with the global, including Bush and Blair. And it ended up with the embodied nature of self. There's some link I'm missing between macro and micro here. I get what you were saying about being embodied, being in my self, in my bodily experience and you gave examples where this is (inaudible) sense of what was happening in the body. But there are seeds of hubris in this as well. After all, the example you gave before was of Tony Blair and I am sure that even in his core being he was convinced that weapons of mass destruction existed, and he was certain of it. So there's something about certainty, surety, which is also really well supported in his Christian thinking ... 'all these questions to me are just tempting my faith, I'm actually certain this is how it is'. How do you get from one to the other here, between my sense of embodying as a source of my truth about the world and Tony Blair's – the difference between Tony Blair and me obviously is that for me fantasies of world domination remain fantasies (laughter). He can change the world (inaudible). It's about certainty. It's about surety. You might say that he's embodying his own narcissism Explain it! (laughter)
- A There are layers and layers of possibility here, as to how I can answer you. If I lean into answering in a grandiloquent fashion then I'm indulging in hubristic quality and maybe being narcissistic myself. So that's one layer. Another layer is I can pretend to say, I can pretend to be humble – and Tony Blair, of course, is wonderful at this, you know, 'I've no idea, you know, it's a huge big question' and so on. So that's another approach. Part of my interest is in the notion of all of us having access to these five abilities. I focused on one today, embodying, but all are equally important. And the thing that came to me after reading that book by David Owen is that actually his response to the Iraq situation wasn't a one-off phenomenon, because he had actually created an alternative form of government, not cabinet government over a long period of time. An awful lot of people were

uncomfortable about it and probably felt deeply uneasy about it and the majority didn't react, didn't object – they didn't *respond* to the situation. Thus, there was a lot of field support for him to end up in that particular way. So it's hugely complex and I really don't know how to answer your question. It is a question about how we translate this embodied kind of knowing more into the public domain.

Q Yes, I know what I know because I know it.

A Yes. And yet, when you say that, there is a resonance through your presence, through the way you said it. Your authenticity, your conviction does get transmitted. And that has some meaning in itself. Of course, if one relies solely on that buzz, then you're open to a great danger – and actually Morris Bowman discusses beautifully in 'Coming to our Senses' – how a demagogue may have the capacity to evoke certain kinds of embodied feelings in people – Hitler being the obvious example, but there are plenty of others. So I think it's a very complicated area, but noticing the way (for instance) that you might be drawn towards a particular point of view and registering this reaction within the body also means your capacity to think and talk and get checks from other people may be increased. It's one of the reasons that I love working with groups so much: I don't feel so responsible any more. I can make a lousy intervention and somebody will challenge me about it, and that's a huge relief. Thank you – it's a good question.

Q I'm not sure I can raise a successful question but it's something which has been trying to emerge since you started to speak. It is in response to the fact that you used the word 'emerge' and 'emergence' half a dozen times in your talk and a couple of times in your answers. I made a couple of notes about emergence. Several points: the first is that complicated things come out of simple ones. That the whole is more than the sum of its parts. That emergent phenomena can't be reduced to simpler forms – it's not reductionist: things that emerge can't be predicted from a simpler element that they emerge from. It seems to hold an assumption about the nature of the attitude which I think comes from Gestalt. Would you agree that embodiedness

means an erotic, aesthetic mode of being, that it's about being completely turned on in life, whether that's the scary, terrifying or the alluring and beautiful in the classical sense?

- A I think you raise important issues. And I think you're quite right that Gestalt is very *simpatico* – or my understanding of it is – with the kind of emergence that you described. The question that then came, about the kind of passionate involvement in life you describe, I think there are degrees of embodiment – and everyone is at a different point. I remember once working with someone who had been living in a re-birthing community and she was so into her bodily feeling states that actually the work that we did for six months or so was all about encouraging her to get into her head and thinking, and not to be constantly swept up in overwhelming feeling, because otherwise she was unable to function in the ordinary world. Arguably, she was very highly embodied, easily emotionally triggered, almost to a self-destructive degree, at least living in our disembodied culture. Without doubt, one of the things that embodiment is – here I'm using it as meaning the capacity to tune into one's self and to others and to the situation – is that it's very difficult to talk about. I mean the way of learning it, of becoming more embodied, is actually often in a therapy exchange or in a slowed-down encounter with another person who is embodied, not through talking about it or going to a lecture. I remember when I started my Gestalt training that I was not embodied; well, obviously hopefully in some sense I was, but I couldn't do the things that a lot of the other people in my group could. So that when people said 'Imagine this is what's happened to you and notice what you are feeling', I had no idea how to tune into myself in this way. Others could do it and I couldn't. And I felt terribly upset about this lack. And there was a wonderful man – a French-Canadian ex-monk – who said to me when I was really upset, he said "Malcolm, the longest journey is from head to heart" and I always remembered it. It was very reassuring, that it was learnable. It IS a long journey, and takes a lot of contact with others in touch with their feelings to help the less fluent on their way. And it's very difficult to know how to talk about being embodied, let alone to define it exactly, if it is not based in direct experience; this has to come first.

Q (inaudible)

A I think this actually links back to a theme in the first part of my talk. My sense, more and more, is that we absolutely need each other. That's another reason why I love groups. For instance, going back to the Iraq war example, if there had been a cabinet discussion and all of the people had been invited to speak and their voices had been heard and there had been a less organised avoidance of such a discussion, then the chances are that better sense might have prevailed. Winston Churchill, for all his bizarre tendencies in many ways, was always willing to change his mind if he heard a very good argument from a senior general against what he was proposing. And so he doesn't figure in David Owen's account of hubristic leaders. We would have to give him another psychiatric label instead. (laughter)

Anyway, thank you very much. We have to stop now.