

RESPONSE

In the Face of Trauma: Relationship, Ethics, and the Possibility of Presence

Heather Anne Keyes, MA

heatherannekeyes@yahoo.com.mx

ABSTRACT | This response fundamentally questions the notion that a contemporary Gestalt therapist can choose whether or not to face trauma. The current and historical global fields are so fraught with violence, destruction, displacement, and systemic dysfunction that “othering” ourselves from trauma has become a popular though illusory adjustment.

KEYWORDS | Gestalt therapy, trauma, privilege, field, ecology, ethics

“What does this phrase evoke in you? . . . And what is your impulse to do with it?” asks Miriam Taylor (2019, 262). She is referring to Lévinas’s phrase, “In the Face of Trauma,” in her keynote speech at the 2018 Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy (AAGT) conference. I wait, I try to feel my way into the relationship, wondering how present I can be with the topic in the midst of everything being at a conference implies for me at that moment. “It is at best an odd choice to put ourselves ‘In the Face of Trauma’” (262), she says, and I become present. A small stirring of indignation begins somewhere on top of the snack foods and assorted salads and flowing rivers of too-strong

Gestalt Review, Vol. 23, No. 3, 2019

DOI: 10.5325/gestaltreview.23.3.0278

Copyright © 2020 The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

conference coffee that have fueled my journey to this table to hear these words. I feel indignation that it is being called a choice. As if there is a place on this planet where we would be able to sit without being in the face of trauma. It requires a massive stretch of the imagination and tremendous creative adjustment bordering on willful ignorance to assert that there is an option other than being where we are: which is in the face of trauma by virtue of our station on this earth in the midst of end-stage industrialized neoliberal capitalism.

Can we choose not to sit with “it”? No. Can we sit comfortably on the edge of awareness of how much of the iceberg of human trauma we will never face? Yes. And, therefore, we must also sit with another “it”: the “It” of privilege. This is what strikes me nearly a year later as I try to craft this response. With deepest respect for Taylor, her work, the work of all us who had the privilege to put most of our own trauma aside and sit with each other for a while in a swanky conference hotel in downtown Toronto—so far from so much of the world in so many ways. Afghanistan, Syria, South Sudan, Yemen, Nigeria, Kenya, Iraq, Myanmar, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Philippines, Venezuela, Honduras, Palestine: all notably absent from the list of thirty-five countries represented at the Toronto gathering have—collectively—much less of a choice in the matter of whether or not or, perhaps choosing with some subtlety, the “how” they sit with trauma.

Taylor refers to “waves of nausea” as she plays with the valve that governs how much of the traumatic experience of her client she will “let in.” We all do that; we have to. If we expand our awareness too far, nonaffectation, inaction, and productive levels of dissociation would become impossible. The illusion of the traumatized “other” would vanish, and we would have such a great responsibility to ACT in response to violence, danger, and destruction that we would disrupt our social fabric and status quo. “Trauma is based on the destruction of coherent patterns,” says Taylor; I say that perhaps establishing coherent patterns is a response to trauma, and a way systematically to exclude it from our awareness. We create narratives that give us an illusion of identity, of stability, of the human condition as other than animal and brute.

Taylor is absolutely right in citing Trauma as “Trickster”: one who fools us into believing we are okay. The trickster goes hand in hand with desensitization, and the normalization of violence of all types—from the

racial and gender-based microaggressions (which became momentarily figural for some, disappointingly normalized for others at the conference itself), which float like microplastics at every level of every society, to the macro-scale disappearances, torture, and murder of thousands, which put Mexico on the map of 2018 alongside Syria and Yemen. As human beings, we can slowly become used to anything. We can adapt. We filter and shift and select, we sidestep, and tune out. And with this self-awareness, it is therefore our obligation to remain expansive, and to keep trauma and the traumatized within our scope of awareness, even if that costs us a share of our comfort.

All too familiar to the founders of the Gestalt approach who fled and lost and joined the temporary promise of never forgetting—never again—we are still at a time where humans are filtered at borders, put into camps and cages, selected to be sent back or saved, wedded or enslaved, based on ethnicity, creed, financial status, and nearly above all else in these times, on gender. Yes, it is the “nature of trauma to elude our knowledge, because of both defense and deficit. The knowledge of trauma is fiercely defended against, for it can be a momentous, threatening, cognitive, and affective task, involving an unjaundiced appraisal of events,” as Taylor cites from Dori Laub and Nanette Auerhahn (1993, 288). I agree with Taylor’s call to deconstruct the dichotomy of alienation and identification; and with Malcolm Parlett (2015), that it requires an “enormous shift in consciousness to transcend this dynamic” (124).

It is imperative that we make that shift in consciousness. We cannot pretend *not* to know that this is what the human animal does, what an instinct-driven human collective without true moral awareness will create, time and time again. We cannot forget. We cannot ignore the fact that, having been driven out and persecuted and “othered,” is part of the personal and collective trauma history that gave us a Gestalt to rally around today. And yet we need to decide to remain awake to it all. Through our mirror neurons, in our own secondary traumatization as therapists, or through the effects of a field falling apart around us, we are all as human beings increasingly required to sit with trauma on a daily basis: literally in the fibers of nearly every object that surrounds us, and in the environmental trauma that its production has implied. We are undeniably part of a deeply traumatized global field. The idea that there is a traumatized “other” to whom we “owe everything,” and that to feel

that other is to bracket our own interests (asymmetry), seems impossible (from my own traumatic ignorance of Emmanuel Lévinas [e.g., 1985]) to reconcile with holistic field theory, as I understand it. What happens to another part of the field I share is part of my own experience. I cannot take it all in and live it fully in my own body, but I can acknowledge the fundamental impossibility of remaining unaffected by trauma.

Is facing trauma with, and in, our clients as a (traumatized) therapist an “unanalyzed moral masochism” (e.g., Orange 2011)? Perhaps it can be for some. Do we do it in a base, projective manner to “find ourselves, preserve our sanity, save someone in our family” (Cozolino 2004, 14)? Perhaps. But we may also undertake this self-aware work to make sense of a traumatized and traumatizing field from within—out of a need for sense, structure, and meaning in our selves. And it is a privilege to have even the temporary illusion of “choosing” to do so when it is becoming ever more a screaming, flaming, burning responsibility.

HEATHER ANNE KEYES, MA, is a licensed Gestalt psychotherapist with a private practice in Durango, Mexico and online. She is the founder and president of the Gestalt Psychotherapy Association of Mexico (AMPG), a professional association for which she coordinates international continuing education programs (conferences, workshops, seminars) throughout Mexico. She is a guest lecturer, workshop leader, and freelance translator/interpreter. Her interests include humor, trauma, bereavement, (im)migration, and creative embodiment.

REFERENCES

- Cozolino, Louis. 2004. *The Making of a Therapist: A Practical Guide for the Inner Journey*. New York: Norton.
- Laub, Dori, and Nanette C. Auerhahn. 1993. “Knowing and not Knowing Massive Trauma: Forms of Traumatic Memory.” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 74: 287–302.
- Lévinas, Emmanuel. 1985. *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Phillippe Nemo*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Orange, Donna M. 2011. *The Suffering Stranger: Hermeneutics for Everyday Clinical Practice*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Parlett, Malcolm. 2015. *Future Sense: Five Explorations of Whole Intelligence for a World That’s Waking Up*. Leicester, UK: Matador.
- Taylor, Miriam. 2019. “In the Face of Trauma: Relationship, Ethics, and the Possibility of Presence.” *Gestalt Review* 23, no. 3: 261–77.