



Gestalt

a philosophy for change

by Trevor Bentley & Susan Clayton

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Unfinished business



Every event, activity and process has a natural flow that begins with sensory awareness and ends when we are satisfied. The flow follows a cycle; I use the analogy of a wave to illustrate this (see Figure 1). The wave provides a useful metaphor to describe the Gestalt Cycle of Experience.

The wave form starts with sensations that emerge out of 'sea depths', otherwise known as the fertile void in Gestalt. The notion of the sea implies a wealth of riches, many untapped, which inform and are informed by our life experiences. Sensations, needs and

feelings seeking attention eventually reach our awareness. As awareness increases so energy increases.

This is like the energy in a rising wave and is the mobilising force that pushes the wave forward. In the workplace this equates with drive and motivation.

If you have ever been surfing you will have noticed that some waves have more energy in them than others; and some are quite deceptive, falling flat just as you begin to ride them. In such a case the rising energy meets an undercurrent pulling in the opposite direction, thus changing the force going



Figure 1. The wave

forward. This is similar to human experiences where mobilising forces harness excitement, energy, drive and motivation towards action, then meet counter forces which diminish the energy for action.

This mobilising phase before action is one of exploring options and making decisions. Assuming the mobilisation is not blocked, the energy is eventually turned into action - the crest of the wave.

Having caught the crest of the wave, surfers will know that full contact is the point at which they can release their full potential, they are at one with the wave. Surfing at this peak is often used in advertising photographs where the surf of the wave is just curling behind surfer. A feeling of full contact with the rolling energy force can be experienced when you are in full flow of a task (either on your own or with others); that feeling when everything is going right and 'nothing will stop you from achieving your goal'.

Completion is the phase where the wave begins to tail off and glides up the beach. You then start to assess how well you did. It is the point of celebrating successes and learning from failures. Reviews are typical in this phase of the cycle in organisations. Successful completion leads to letting go and moving on, it is the withdrawal phase; the point of basking on the beach feeling exhausted and satisfied at the exhilaration felt from your surfing experience. In other words the healthy completion of a fully experienced cycle.

The cycle describes a process. We are constantly in this process in many

ways. To experience the cycle you just simply follow through your moment to moment experiences.

Try the following.

Next time you go to lunch notice how hungry you are, or not. Are you eating because it is lunch time, or are you eating because you are hungry? Or both?

Notice the noises and smells that are around and if you buy your lunch, the full range of food available. Flavour each mouthful of food as though it is the first time you have ever tasted it and notice how thoughts or conversations distract your attention from this.

Pay attention to how you feel as you return to the workplace. Was it a good meal? Have you satisfied your hunger? Did colleagues interfere with the process or enhance it by joining you?

Gestalt practice is working with process. Process is about relationship; with ourselves, with other people and with the environment. Good relationship engenders good contact, a rich and engaging process. The Gestalt Cycle is a dynamic process of moving into and away from contact.



Wave hopping



When a cycle is broken, disturbed or interrupted we are left with unfinished business. Just like falling off the surf board or losing the wave energy. The result is that we will return again and again to try to complete the cycle, or we will suffer the anxiety and frustration of never finishing. We can see this process occurring frequently in many organisations where individual people and teams leap from action to action without adequate time spent in other parts of the cycle. I call this 'wave hopping'; frequently referred to as 'the futile void', in contrast to the fertile void of a healthy cycle (see Figure 2).

If we move the surface line up or down the diagram according to where the leap occurs we can see where the incomplete gestalt begins and ends. This is a useful exercise to do as it identifies where the unfinished business exists in the culture of a group of people. So if the leap occurs at full contact then reflective learning is missed, assessments of success are

excluded, with no satisfaction and recognition for outcomes achieved. This will lead to low morale, repeated errors, and people seeking recognition (completion of unfinished business) through other, inappropriate, channels.

On hitting the next wave, straight into action, means going into action without consideration of assessing the real needs, as opposed to perceived needs. When people act on assumptions rather than seeking facts the energy is built on 'firefighting' or imported from previous tasks which remain unfinished. There is no time to experience the fertile void or expand awareness where innovation arises and assumptions are questioned. Contact with self, others and the environment is diminished with little opportunity for growth and change.

When attempting to change a wavehopping culture, knowing where people 'take off' and 'land' is important.

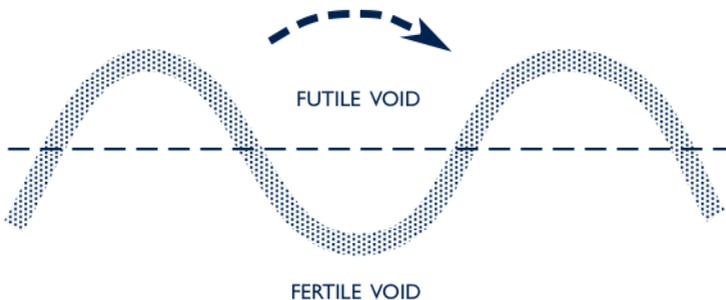
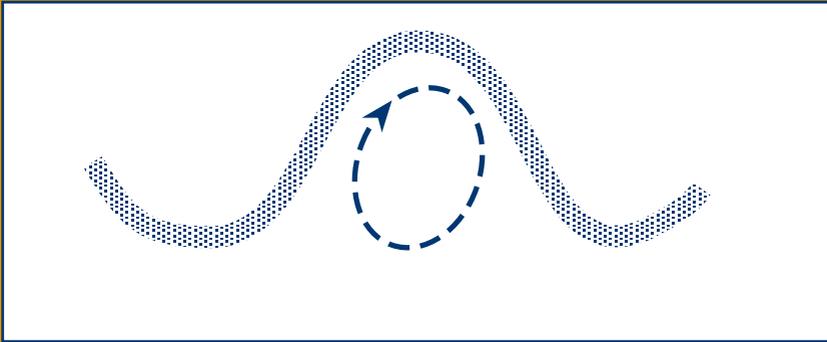


Figure 2. Wave hopping

Figure 3. Going around in circles



To begin to work with what's in the sea when people are on the crest of the wave is often too big a gap. What is likely to be much more productive in promoting development and change is moving step by step into the neglected parts of the wave. In this way people become aware of what interests and motivates them and how to harness this into the business. Their awareness increases and by encouraging reviews, which is a place to assess successes and gain recognition, their experience moves healthily towards completion.

Going around in circles

A different experience of unfinished business is when we find ourselves 'going around in circles' or feeling like 'we have been here before' (see Figure 3).

At times we find ourselves in a situation where we are blocked somewhere in the cycle, either by

ourselves (ie 'I was too scared to say anything'- afraid to say what I wanted) or by others ('You will not talk to me in that manner' therefore not listened to). We walk away feeling incomplete. Then when we meet situations that resemble those where the unfinished business occurred, we play out a pattern which has become fixed, as a way of trying to complete it. Usually we are unaware of our fixed patterns of behaviour. Change occurs when we find a way to effectively complete the Gestalt, or our behaviour is brought to our attention and we realise how we have become stuck. For example, if I have a fear of failure due to severe punishment for failures in my school days, my pattern might be to avoid taking action, therefore avoiding putting myself in a position where I can be assessed and fail. I might be very good at coming up with ideas - and getting recognition for this - but doing anything with these ideas becomes difficult. I become blocked before action. Being encouraged to recognise this pattern and then coached through

to take risks and complete a cycle fully allows me to challenge the belief I carry, and to change.

The cycle can become blocked at any point. The earlier the block the more difficult it is to identify and take forward to complete the cycle. When you feel like you are going around in circles, there probably exists a fixed Gestalt caused by unfinished business from an encounter somewhere in your past.



Creative adaption

Unfinished business describes a process where needs have not been met. Yet we can be very creative in getting our needs met in other ways. We frequently refer to this as manipulation or game playing; where people manipulate others and the environment in order to get what they want when the natural route has been blocked. We see this in children who behave badly in order to get attention and recognition when their needs are not sufficiently met. Such behaviours in adulthood are inappropriate but by that time they have become so habitual that we do not realise they are there, or that we play them out.

Think of your own behaviours. How do you 'get around' your partner when you want something that you know might cause a problem. Or how do you get recognition at work when people are too busy to notice what you are doing?

There are four high-profile needs that people in the workplace strive for:

- To get the job done.
- To get the job right.
- To get along with people.
- To get recognition.

People are very clever at adapting ways to meet these needs. When an aware choice is made about which approach to follow then this is a healthy adaptation; when we act through habit, contact is diminished and the potential for change inaccessible. Such behaviours might manifest through

- hostility and aggressiveness in order to get things done
- pedantic behaviour in order to achieve high standards
- always agreeing in order to get along
- sniping in order to get recognition

The reason why these behaviours become habitual is that paradoxically they never really fulfil the underlying need because of the distorted nature of the behaviour; For instance people who snipe may get attention but they never get the loving attention that they often yearn for.



Completing unfinished business

The behaviours we exhibit ourselves and see in others may not fully reveal the underlying need that is seeking completion. If we stop and consider the behaviour and observe its ineffectiveness we can begin to identify where it stems from and nourish the starving need more appropriately. Becoming aware of our unfinished business and how we play out habitual patterns of behaviour, is the starting point for dealing with them and in some circumstances is enough to create change.

Creative completion

When we operate through fixed patterns of behaviour our capacity to engage in full contact with others becomes diminished. We are in a passive, routine and stereotyping mode. True contact is always creative and dynamic, shifting away from stereotyping towards experiencing people and situations in a different light. So the aim is to increase contact through completing unfinished business and learning new behaviours.

Unfinished business drains energy, so it makes sense to find ways of dealing with it and learning new ways of working. If 'the business' is current, say you have had a recent encounter with someone which left you feeling uncomfortable and incomplete, then it makes sense to go back and take the issue up with the person involved. For example:

Two women who were not speaking to each other caused discomfort in the department whenever they were together. A team member encouraged the senior woman to take the initiative to deal with the problem, exploring how she might do this. They were quite creative and uninhibited in their suggestions, which included doing nothing. *This is a useful option to include in any creative exercise of this kind as it increases the emotions attached to the current behaviour encouraging mobilisation.* With some reluctance she chose to initiate a meeting in which she would articulate the fact that they were having difficulties and suggested discussing the problem over coffee. For her it was risky because of the nature of the problem.

The outcome was productive; contact was immediately increased. She allowed herself to be challenged on some of the assumptions she had

been carrying around about the other person. Although she argued that they would never be best buddies they began to understand their differences, the business was completed and a new relationship began based on a healthy process.

If on the other hand the unfinished business stems from the distant past, there are two tasks; to find ways of completing past business, replacing old habits with new ways of working. This latter task is developmental, requiring support and help to learn different types of behaviour that will achieve more satisfying outcomes.

It may not be possible to complete unfinished business with the person from whom it originated. However, you can do it using your imagination, like writing them a letter and then burning it, by imagining that they are sitting in front of you and telling them what you really wanted to say at the time; and if they have died, by visiting their grave. Through creative exercise, completion can be achieved.

Often old habits have become so well established that people miss the very thing that would really fulfil their needs. So, for example, if the need is for recognition, they frequently do not hear when recognition is being given. Bringing their attention to this, for instance when working in teams, can create a shift. Notice that the work is still with process, not with the act of giving them recognition. This is where creativity exists and the power in Gestalt begins to take effect.

In organisations where the nature of the culture is wave hopping, the work to be done is to build on those parts of the cycle that are under-developed. For example:

- If completion is being interrupted, take time to review, celebrate achievements, give and receive feedback and encourage learning to help people move towards completion. Try to ensure that these processes arising out of cultural values are seen as an important part of 'the way things are done around here'.
- If energy is being blocked, observe, notice and build on the energy that people bring into the workplace. When people exhibit interest, fascination, excitement and enthusiasm, potential exists. Lack of energy, where people are being pushed into doing tasks that don't grab their interest, will achieve far less than is possible.
- If awareness is being interrupted, then increasing awareness will induce change and growth. This is done by getting people to focus on what is happening in the flow of the moment and to notice how they respond to events.

Completion of unfinished business, both old and new, releases energy. This energy then becomes available for new tasks and for new relationships. It is a refreshing process that enables us to wait patiently in the fertile void for the next event that attracts our attention.

Interrupting process flow

Organismic self-regulation



In the first article in this series Sue Clayton talked about the Gestalt cycle and introduced the idea that the cycle of awareness can be interrupted so that rather than completing the natural fulfilment of our needs we are left with some unfinished business. This is both frustrating and on a physical level can be painful.

Because we are self-regulating organisms our natural process will keep trying to reach completion. This leads to us being constantly in search of completion for old Gestalts whilst, at the same time, trying to complete current (here and now) Gestalts. Needless to say this causes stress and tension and can lead to us behaving 'inappropriately'.

Imagine that you have recently had a row with someone close to you and it is unresolved. There will be a continuing tension until you can resolve the issue and complete the Gestalt. If during this time an issue arises with a colleague at work it is likely that the feelings attached to the unresolved row will spill over into

your contact with your colleague. This might mean that you are angry with them, or that you burst into tears over the slightest criticism. In other words the self-regulating mechanism that is searching for completion of the previous Gestalt can affect the 'here and now' way in which we behave.

It is important that we learn to understand and honour our own natural process so that we can function in a way that is more satisfying for ourselves and consequently for those we come into contact with.

I like to think of this recognition of process as 'risking being real'. In the above example of the unresolved row if you were able to be aware of what you are feeling and to recognise that these feelings belong to the incomplete Gestalt rather than what is happening right now, it might be possible for you to either share what is happening for you with your colleague, or to react to the new event without bringing in your feelings from the old unresolved event. This is 'being real' and it is risky.

Habitual (learnt) ways of being

In order to survive, right from the beginning of our lives, we learn and develop ways of being that bring us what we need. You only have to watch a newborn baby to see this process at work. This minute human being is completely organismically self-regulating. Demanding food and sleep and basic hygiene exactly when it needs it. As time passes the newborn baby learns what works and what doesn't work in its particular environment and it adapts accordingly.

Eventually this learning takes on the messages from parents, teachers and others who care for and influence the growing child. These messages begin to 'condition' the way we are. Here are a few you will know:

- Children should be seen and not heard.
- Little boys don't cry.
- Little girls don't fight.

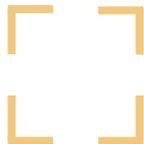
There are thousands of these messages and many are much harsher and more damaging to the developing person. And what we do is to learn how to survive in spite of what we hear and how we are treated. We develop ways of 'blocking' our natural process flow to fit into the unnatural demands placed on us.

It is important that we learn to understand and honour our own natural process so that we can function in a way that is more satisfying for ourselves and consequently for those we come into contact with.

Blocking process flow

One of the most difficult transitions for young children is from wearing nappies to using the toilet. It is perhaps the most traumatic period of the child's life so far. There are many messages about being good if you don't wet your pants and/or the bed and bad if you do. All kinds of inducements are offered to get the child to buy into this new set of rules (conditioning). One moment it is OK to react organismically and the next moment this natural process has to be blocked and a suitable receptacle found. The stress and tension this causes for the young child is enormous.

As we grow older we realise that to feel 'safe', that is acceptable and loved, we have to fit into a particular pattern of behaviour that suits those taking care of us. So we do what is necessary



and we block our natural process to scream when we are mad, to hit someone when they hit us, to cry when we are hurt, to scream with pleasure, to throw jelly around, to make a mess, and so on.

When we enter the world of work we continue this blocking process as we learn what is 'expected' behaviour in this new environment. We dress 'appropriately' and behave in 'acceptable' ways. We need to belong, to be accepted and to be loved, so we block our natural individuality, our natural process so that we can survive and protect ourselves.

After many years of developing such survival strategies we can become 'stuck' in habitual ways of being that might not satisfy us. We probably collect a store of many unfinished Gestalts that we may never complete, but which influence how we are and 'contaminate' our current contact with people. These habitual ways of interrupting our contact with our environment and other people have grown as a form of protection and in protecting us they can impede our contact and prevent us completing our interactions.

In other words we become expert blockers of our own natural process, and we do it in a wide variety of ways.



Ways of interrupting our process flow

Switching off our senses, not seeing, not hearing, etc, can be a very effective way of protecting ourselves. I have spent much of my life wearing a very strong suit of armour. I felt protected, and at the same time I couldn't feel the world outside. Desensitising ourselves is a very powerful way of avoiding being hurt.

Casting off what we don't want to hear or feel is another effective form of protection and with my armour went a very large shield which has until recently served me very well, deflecting missiles of all shapes and sizes. And it has also stopped me receiving many of the things I wanted to see, hear and feel.

Taking in when it is done without being selective, that is when the messages are gulped down and obeyed without thinking, actually stops me from rejecting what I don't want. Like over-eating I feel full and sick and I want to spit out. And I do need to be able to take in the information that is useful and I need to be selective about it.





Putting out our own ideas as if they are someone else's. Disowning what we really believe and projecting it onto others can be unreal and inauthentic. 'You shouldn't interrupt people' is a projection, when what I really mean is, 'I don't like being interrupted'. With my armour and shield goes a large sharp sword which has also served me well.

Going inside where I feel safe and protected is useful and I need to make sure that I don't do to myself what I want to do to others. I need to make sure that when I am angry with someone else I am not angry instead with myself, or when I want to hurt someone else that I don't hurt myself instead.

Merging with others because I need to belong can lead to me losing myself. When I merge, or become confluent I lose sight of me and my needs and focus only on others. This means that my needs don't get met. Conforming is a protective and helpful way to operate, and at the same time I need to be aware of my own uniqueness.

These ways of interrupting our natural process flow are also useful ways in which we can protect ourselves and keep ourselves intact. So we need to be aware of how we use them so that we can do so in a way that best serves our needs and helps us to complete Gestalts and reach satisfaction.

Restoring process flow

The first thing I need to do is to honour myself. I am a unique individual. I owe it to myself to be as real as I can be in my contact with others. I see organisations as relationship systems where people function mainly through their interactions with other people. If these interactions are not effective then neither is the organisation. For relationships to be effective people have to honour themselves and be real.

We need to listen to what we need. Listen to our organism when it cries out for attention. Listen to our own thoughts and ideas, and listen to others so that we can take in what we want and spit out what we don't want. By doing this it is possible that we can become aware of what is going on for us at this moment. Then we can choose what to do.

I have laid down my sword and shield and I have climbed out of my armour. They are still available if I should ever need them and in the meantime I am more real, more present and more aware of who I am.



Sharpening awareness

*These beauteous forms,
Through a long absence,
have not been to me
As in a landscape to a blind man's eye*

Wordsworth 1798 (Tintern Abbey)



Awareness is an experience that can only happen in a moment by moment process. As you read this your attention may stay with the article or it may flit to noises going on around you. You may momentarily think of a loved one and wonder what they are doing right now, or smile to yourself as you look forward to seeing friends in the pub this evening. This is the shape of awareness; expectations, memories, feelings, imaginings as well as concrete experiences, are carried in the flow of the moment.

Awareness cannot be experienced in a different place or a different time other than now. Our awareness informs us how to behave, act and respond to passing events in our lives. Past and future are oriented in present awareness.

Awareness defines what we need and what we experience. It enables us to be responsible for who we are and what we do. Awareness can be about yourself (subjective) and about others and the environment (objective), ranging from a clear focus to dim images.

Our integrity and personal power is dependent on self-awareness (subjective awareness); our interpersonal skills and observation skills are dependent on objective awareness. A good balance of the two provides a powerful contribution towards the effective management and development of others in the workplace.

Figure - Ground - Field

In Gestalt we talk about *figure*, *ground*, and *field*. Figure 4 illustrates this and the concept of awareness; what our attention is focused on at any one time. For example: *I am sitting writing this in my conservatory, my attention flits from thinking about what to say feeling excited about the subject (subjective awareness) and hearing my dog suddenly running down the stairs then seeing him bounding towards me (objective awareness). The telephone rings and as I walk towards it I notice my annoyance at having to leave my writing to answer it.*

It is impossible for us to take in every aspect of our being with the same sharp focus of attention, there is too much and we would go into overload. We cope with this by allowing awareness to emerge out of,

and recede into the background; *ground*. So the *figure* is that which stands out against a dim background. It wasn't that my dog did not exist before I heard him running down the stairs, he was simply part of the ground; existing but not the focus of my attention. When the telephone rang my focus of interest changed and the dog receded into ground. This is a process of selection, influenced by the things that grab our attention.

We can understand figure and ground through photography where blurred images occur in a photograph because we are 'out of focus' whereas good figure emerges when we are in focus, our contrast is high and depth of field finely tuned. The more sophisticated we become with our knowledge and fine use of equipment the more outstanding are the end results.

The refers to the whole situation in which figure and ground interrelate.

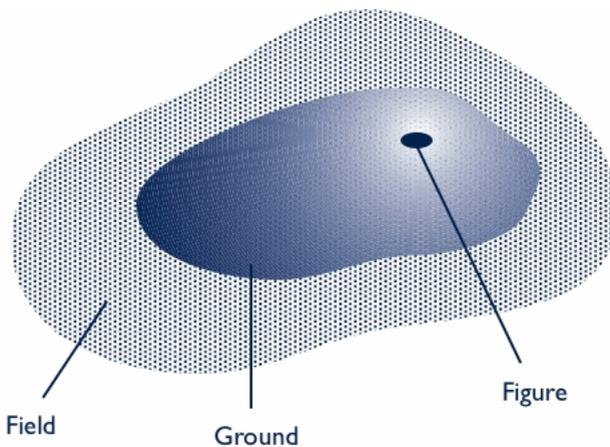


Figure 4. Figure - Ground - Field

For example, this is one of a series of six articles forming a whole. If I allow myself to be distracted by the telephone too much while I write this article, then that could delay completion of this article and publication of the whole of the series. If this series were published in 1997 instead of 1996 then the meaning for you will be different. You might have learnt a lot more about Gestalt by then or your focus of interest could be somewhere else, so the article would have a different meaning.

Clouded awareness

There are many factors that can dim or cloud our awareness such as blocked feelings, rigid viewpoints, prejudices, assumptions, inner conflict, undigested and underdeveloped learning. They create a mist through which we see dim images that are confusing. Clarity is lost. There is no sharp focus. We use the controls on the camera to dim our awareness instead of sharpen it.

Confusion is clouded awareness. When we are confused we do not feel very powerful, we lose sight of our integrity, we are unsure as to how to respond to the world; we have to guess. Acting on uncertainty is stressful and risky. Clarity is power because it enables us to define and obtain what we need. Let's look at some behaviours that create the cloud in more detail.

Blocked feelings

Feelings and emotions provide us with information about our response to the environment, allowing us to act with integrity and self support. When we do not allow ourselves access to our feelings then we are using the controls of the camera to dim our awareness.

Prejudices

These are rigid and biased viewpoints that have developed through a process of stereotyping and discrimination; having lost their flexibility and clarity. Discrimination is a healthy and necessary process for our survival. However, when this becomes an habitual process (habits occur out of awareness) the consequences are of a distorted and clouded viewpoint. Prejudiced people only see the behaviours that support their prejudices, they then act in a way that confirms their beliefs. Clarity is lost due to lack of objective (other) awareness.

Have you ever met someone for the first time and judged them negatively only to find some time later that they turned out to be a really interesting person. If you had acted from a prejudiced viewpoint, every time you met them you would have treated them as though your first impressions were true without the opportunity to discover otherwise. Your awareness would have been completely clouded and your relationship with them remained difficult.



Inner conflict

Here the 'inner' (the subjective) aspect of awareness is the issue. No doubt there have been times in your life when you have experienced conflicting values or needs. For example, if I assert myself and show my individuality here, I might not be liked: it's important for me to be recognised for my difference and to be liked.

To be really clear about inner conflict requires fully understanding both sides of the issue, just like in managing conflict between two people. Lack of clarity leads to confusion; it is that moment when you say 'I'm confused'.

Other behaviours

There are many behaviours that contribute to clouding. The first step towards dealing with them is acknowledging that things are not quite so clear as you would like them to be, or even that when it comes to the crunch you are aware of very little.

The power of awareness

The power of awareness lies in the knowing. Clouded awareness means that we do not know therefore we do not have to change.

Raising awareness is the essence to change - visioning exercises and action planning are secondary aids. Once you know, you cannot undo that knowing. When you are aware you can become energised, you can move forward to take action. That is why awareness is so powerful.

Awareness helps us define what is real and what is imagined, enabling us to respond to the environment effectively. So if in my school days I learned that 'being smart' meant always getting it right, then in my adult life at work I may put too much effort in getting it right as opposed to, say, getting it finished. This leads to a split between real demands and felt demands leading to confusion. Through awareness we can begin to recognise this split and behave in a way that is more appropriate to the needs of the department. You feel more powerful in yourself which supports the people you work with.

With awareness we are able to engage with others more powerfully, knowing when good contact is not being achieved and then able to do something about it. The implications of this in training and development are



wide. Good awareness informs the trainer:

- of their own integrity
- when trainees are losing interest
- when you are on a different wavelength to your co-facilitator
- when the needs of an individual seem a world apart from the needs of their department
- when the group is angry
- (add some of your own)

just consider all the points above and then imagine that you lack awareness. How powerful do you feel as you consider what might happen without the important information that you receive through self and objective awareness.

Awareness opens up the power of choice and options to change the way we work in order to be more effective.

Pointers for sharpening awareness

So how can you begin to sharpen awareness. I suggest you begin by working on your own awareness and notice when you are doing the following:

- talking' about'
- reminiscing

- intellectualising
- asking too many questions
- asking rhetorical questions
- interpreting
- being confused

These are all indicators that awareness is in some way diminished. This is not to say that these behaviours are wrong, indeed they are natural healthy behaviours until they become habitual or repetitive.

Let's just experiment with these. Identify someone who you could work with and act out one of the behaviours identified above in a conversation with them. Choose one that is familiar to you. Notice the response of the other person.

Then change the conversation to include present awareness, ie in 'talking about' change and the effects on your department you might say something like '... and even as I talk about it I get butterflies in my stomach'.

With each point of discussion notice your own response and observe your partner's response. Notice how your pattern of conversation is different and how your level of contact with the other person changes.



Enabling others

Talking about, intellectualising and reminiscing

An indication that awareness is low is when people spend a lot of time talking about, intellectualising and reminiscing. This can often happen in teams and groups when there is a 'group' block. The group members remove the subject from the present into discussing the theory or philosophy of it; or repeatedly slip into exploring events that have happened in past; or link the current topic with events that have happened 'out there'. The way to manage this is simply to bring the discussion back into the present by saying something like: 'So is there a comparison with that group to this one?'; or 'It seems to me that you find it easier to talk about the subject than to deal with it'. These are 'process interventions' and refer to the process of working, as opposed to intervening with content material, ie interpretive or analytical of the subject.



When people repeatedly ask questions

Questions can be a useful way to collect data and so expand our understanding of a subject. Yet we all fall into the trap at times of 'making conversation'; a real block to rich and wholesome contact. A good way to 'make conversation' without real engagement is to ask questions. Have a go, think of all the questions that you yourself use when making conversation. What type of questions are they? interrogating? rhetorical ('don't you think that. ..)? Why questions? Reflect on a recent incident when this happened. Was it rich and wholesome or superficial? Imagine yourself having the same conversation without any questions.

There are times when superficial contact is all that we want; yet much of the time superficial contact is all that we get simply because through habit we have lost sight of how to engage well with others. Once again, fluidity and common sense are important.

When facilitating I have to identify the real need of an 'interrogator' and recognise whether I am in receipt of real or rhetorical questions. Turning genuine enquiry back can interfere with your relationship with the trainee and their learning; turning a rhetorical question back to ask for a statement in its place can release awareness, growth and development.



Awareness interventions

I always feel a need to put a 'health warning' on suggested interventions to group processes, simply because they might become 'fixed gestalts'. They lose their effectiveness when used intellectually; as opposed to the process of fluid, integrated facilitation. The best way is to work with your observations and self awareness, building on both of these to provide creative and effective intervention. The following are six simple guides towards engendering awareness when facilitating groups.

The power of awareness lies in the knowing. Clouded awareness means that we do not know, therefore we do not have to change.

- *Notice your own discomforts* and use them appropriately to support the learning of the group. Maintaining your own integrity aids learning for others.
- *Bracketing off.* If there are issues rising in the group that hit an 'unfinished business' button for you,

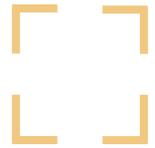
acknowledge it to yourself and bracket it off until you can deal with it under more appropriate circumstances.

- *Describing your observations* brings awareness into the immediate and concrete.
- *Turning questions into statements* encourages people to take responsibility for what they say.
- *Challenging the generalising* ('it', 'we') elements in language focuses on subjective awareness.
- *Bringing attention to polarities like but, always and never* challenges stereotyping and prejudice.

Conclusion

Sharpening your own awareness is the first step towards helping other people to sharpen theirs. As my awareness increases and as my habitual behaviour diminishes I am able to make much better contact with people and my environment, and complete more Gestalts. It is through my awareness that I grow and it is through my growth that I influence those around me.

Business as unusual



One of my great delights in using a Gestalt approach in organisations is that by becoming aware and focusing on what is happening, however mundane it might seem, perspectives and attitudes shift. It is this aspect of Gestalt which is 'business as unusual'.

Fascination with the ordinary

*To see a World in a grain of sand and a
Heaven in a wildflower hold infinity in the
palm of your hand and eternity in an hour*

William Blake

Most of what happens in organisations is very ordinary, so much so that it is taken for granted, goes unquestioned and becomes ingrained in what we refer to as the 'culture'. Working with Gestalt means being fascinated with the ordinary. When ordinary events and reactions are focused on with the

magnifying glass of fascination they become transformed into exciting and sometimes deeply meaningful events. Here is an example.

I am working with a small close-knit team who are discussing the way forward on an important project when I notice how one of the members is tapping his pencil on his pad. He seems to be listening intently to the person who is speaking. She has finished speaking.

"What is happening for you right now?" I ask the pencil tapper.

"Nothing," he says.

"I notice you are tapping your pencil on your pad. What's that about?"

"I don't know," he replies as he stops tapping.

Discovering the obvious

"Do it some more only stronger," I suggest. As he is doing it I say, "What are the words that go with it?" At first there are no words then, with each tap, a word, "This - is - the - wrong - way - to - go - this - is - the - wrong - way - to - go - this - is - the - wrong - way - to - go."

"Which is the right way then?" I ask, interrupting his tapping.

"Well," he says, looking up, "I think . . .".

He then embarks on a very clear, concise explanation on why the team should do something different. This is something he has not done before even though he has often tapped his pencil.

After the meeting the team leader asked me how I knew that was going to happen. I told her I didn't know what was going to happen. I was just fascinated with the pencil tapping.

When we ignore the ordinary we ignore life. We drift along half asleep until something extraordinary wakes us up.

I have just returned with my dog, Jenny, from a walk in the woods that surround my home. For the whole of the walk Jenny is darting here and there, sniffing and poking with her front paw at the undergrowth. Nothing is obvious to her, everything has to be explored, she never knows what she might turn up.

It has been a beautiful day and the colours of the leaves are wonderful. I stopped when I came across some fungus growing on an old tree stump. I was fascinated. I took some photographs and I poked about around the tree stump, disturbing some ants that were hurrying along in a military column, each carrying a piece of leaf approximately ten times its size. For a short time I became lost in this micro world. Then Jenny, impatient to continue, stuck her tongue in my ear.

Have you ever noticed how, when someone tells you something is obvious and it doesn't seem to you that it is, that now it has been pointed out to you it becomes obvious?

Have you ever been given directions to find somewhere and you are given some landmark with the fatal words "It's obvious, you can't miss it." And what happens? You miss it.

What seems to happen is that the constant babble of thoughts that clutter our minds for most of the time obscure or deaden the information we





are receiving from our senses. We are so busy 'thinking' (paying attention to thoughts) that we miss the obvious messages from our senses. Our eyes see the landmark and feed the information to the brain where it then seems to have to wait for a gap in the babble. By which time we are well past the landmark.

To discover the obvious we have to pay attention to our senses and listen to what they are telling us. We have to still our frenetic minds and make contact with our environment and other people through our senses. And make contact with ourselves through our feelings. We have to pay attention and then, and only then, will we discover the obvious.

The unseen (because we don't look)

I watched the young shop assistant stacking loaves onto the shelf. I waited. She saw me and smiled and carried on stacking the shelf until she had finished. After a few moments she came over to me.

"Can I help you?"

"You could've helped me a few minutes ago. I thought customer

service was a priority here," I said, a little impatiently.

"You're right," she said, "I'm sorry."

This is an example of the unseen. The shop assistant saw me but not my discomfort or my need to be served. She didn't see these other things because she wasn't looking. It was almost as if what she was doing and her focus on that activity was blinding her to my needs.

Have you ever heard the expression - 'That is blindingly obvious'? It is a strange expression but very perceptive because it is saying that something is so clear that we can't see it. It is as if we are blinded by a veil of thought.

It is not difficult to learn to look and to really take in what we see, not just the physical aspects but the other aspects of what is happening around us. A heightened level of awareness might be a good way to describe this kind of looking.

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The unheard

(because we don't listen)

I was at a meeting about a new series of books I am working on. During the meeting we were discussing the author's brief that we would be sending to prospective authors for the series. I made what I believed was an important comment.

"I don't like the chapter structure that you have included in the brief. I think it gives authors the wrong impression of what we want."

The senior editor replied, "I don't want to change the brief again. We'll see how we get on with it as it is."

"I'm sorry", I said, "but I think it is important."

"Well, let me have your ideas in writing after the meeting," she responded and we moved on.

I sent my ideas in the next day.

Some time later, after receiving several proposals from authors prepared according to the brief that I didn't like, we had another discussion. The senior editor agreed to change the brief and she said, "I wished you'd told me sooner, it would've saved a lot of work."

What happened at the meeting was that for some reason the senior editor didn't hear what I was saying. Her thoughts were on something else and she became deaf to my words. She did not pay attention to what I was saying

because it didn't fit into her current focus of what she wanted to hear. I call this the 'ear plugs of thought', and it is a very common occurrence in most organisations.

Learning to listen means stilling the constant mind babble and focusing attention on the person who is speaking and what is being said. By focusing on the person first and seeing them we are able to then hear them clearly. We cannot choose what we hear, unless we use ear plugs, but we can choose what we pay attention to and listening is all about paying attention.



The unsaid

(because we don't speak)

Perhaps this is one aspect of 'business as unusual' which most frequently generates surprise in people. I think this is because we all choose to censor what we say to such an extent that we often say nothing. Now censoring has its uses and I am not suggesting that we never censor. What I am suggesting is that most of us experience moments when we wish we had said something.

One of my favourite interventions with individuals and groups is, "What really interests me is what you are not saying". Another favourite intervention used by one of my Gestalt trainers is,



"Think out loud". The aim is to bring the unspoken into the field, because it's only when this happens that we can pay attention to it. If it stays part of your mental babble it gets lost.

The expression, 'tongue tied' is another of those interesting uses of language. Who ties our tongue so that we cannot speak? It also implies that we know what we want to say but we can't bring ourselves to say it.

One of the ways that we can realise our unspoken words is to preface what we say with the simple statement, "What I want you to hear is...". This simple phrase is like a key to unlock a veritable treasure chest of feelings, ideas, beliefs, emotions, and whatever else you want to set free. The statement is also a powerful way of alerting others to the need we have for them to listen to what we are going to say.

*Learning to listen means
stilling the constant mind
babble and focusing
attention on the person
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what is being said.*

The authentic self

To be able to operate on the basis of 'business as unusual' means taking risks. All these risks are to do with revealing our true selves to those we come into contact with. This is like removing the layers of ourselves from our superficial surface to that deeper more real level of who we are, like peeling an onion. It is risky because we might get hurt, we might be misunderstood, we might be ridiculed and we might be rejected.

Being authentic means being 'all of me'. This is much more difficult than it sounds and takes a willingness to experiment with removing some of the blocks to my natural process; leaving my armour, my sword and my shield at home when I venture out into the world. If I do this then it is possible for me to allow myself the luxury of being 'fascinated by the ordinary' and the time to 'discover the obvious'.

As one of my clients said to me, "So we are going to have to take the rough with the smooth?" "What smooth?" I replied

Integrating extremes



Behaviours, attitudes and beliefs can become fixed in an extreme Polarity. The consequence is reduced contact with ourselves, others and the environment leading to behaviours that support prejudice, conformity and destruction of creative potential. These polarities affect working practice and they can be managed using integrating methods.

Discovering opposites

Polarities exist at opposite ends of the same continuum. *You can't have one without the other.* Love cannot exist without hate, joy cannot exist without sadness, black cannot exist without white. Using the analogy of a camera, contrast is needed in order to gain clarity. Problems arise when the contrast has reached its maximum potential *and become stuck*; the opposite is so lost in the background that it is not even considered.

For example some people deny their vulnerability. 'Be strong' is the message they give to themselves and the message they convey to the world. When they are in a situation where they become vulnerable, ie afraid, sad, angry, they work hard to avoid any contact with themselves, denying their feelings. Paradoxically what the world tends to see is their vulnerability. It leaks out.

Effort to keep the denied polarity (in this example vulnerability) out of awareness is draining, resulting in wasted energy and often illness.

Opposites are not contradictory; they form two sides of the same coin and are complementary. When one is figure then the other must be in the field as part of the ground. The language we use articulates our values on positives and negatives in polarities

The more contrast that exists between positive and negative the greater the differential.

I want to emphasise that polarities are not necessarily positive against negative. It is only through our own biases that we increase the contrast of polarities through using positive attributes to contrast with negative attributes. People who act with integrity recognise the positives and negatives in themselves throughout each continuum.

Figure 5 shows some positive attributes of polarities, using similes that could be interpreted as negative, in brackets. Remember these are my interpretations, yours may be different.

You will notice that each polarity could be defined in many ways. The meaning of the language we use will describe our own polarities and convey the extent to which extremes are integrated. To overcome any dissonance where we hold fixed extremes we are likely to describe the opposite in negative terms. For example, the opposite to warm hearted might be hostile.

As we all have an infinite number of distinctive polarities you might find

it useful to identify some of your own, noticing those that are less well integrated, ie that cause you some discomfort.

Start by listing a number of attributes that you recognise in yourself. Then think of an opposite for each one. Having done this, for each polarity list a range of words, positive and negative, that have a similar meaning. You might like to refer to a thesaurus to help you. Notice the words you use and your comfort level as you identify opposites in yourself.

Good integration of opposites is about accepting all parts of ourselves in each polarity; taking responsibility for our actions and the consequences of our behaviour. For example, in a situation where your contribution is not recognised you notice that you become self-centred; in a situation where you are respected for your contribution you notice that you are self-aware. This flexibility introduces shades of colour as well as shades of grey into our character; we become *more characterful*.

Spontaneous (impulsive)	Considered (calculating)
Self-reliant (stubborn)	Dependent (burdensome)
Accurate (pedantic)	Carefree (careless)
Self-aware (self-centred)	Selfless (self-denying)
Warm-hearted (smothering)	Hostile (aloof)

Figure 5. Positive attributes of polarities

Secondly, we tend to use our own definitions of ourselves (or the contrasts that we deny in ourselves) to describe other people.

Having identified your own list, think of one or two people that you work with, ie someone that you work well with and someone who you don't get on so well with. What characteristics can you identify in them that are similar and different to your own polar opposites?

Polarities provide vital information to understand and value difference. Valuing difference is prominent in our appreciation of diversity - other people become more characterful to us. If we do not recognise and value polarities in ourselves, then we will not be able to value them in others.

Sustaining biases

Clinging to one side of a polarity in an attempt to keep the situation simple means working hard to maintain a biased position. To do this people engage in the following four behaviours:

- avoid contradictions and inconsistencies
- see only those things that support their viewpoint
- compromise in order to sustain the fixation
- create positive versus negative polarities which bring out the contrast.



I was working with a group of managers on their development recently. One of them was continually running down a senior manager who others seemed to have considerable respect for. When this was brought to her attention she commented that the manager in question was incompetent. When I asked her what this meant, she said: "It is wrong to make mistakes as a manager, a good manager must not be incompetent, that is bad management practice and presents a bad image both inside and outside the organisation." With the help of her colleagues she discovered the following.

- She was ignoring contradictions to her belief that might suggest the opposite, ie that mistakes lead to learning which leads to more effective management; or that no-one is infallible and admitting to mistakes conveys integrity, which is a valuable quality in management.
- She only saw in other people's behaviours those aspects that supported her belief, ie that owning mistakes leads to loss of respect (in her case others losing her respect).

- She would compromise by half owning an alternative then taking it back again. "Yes making mistakes leads to learning but it also leads to bad management practice."
- She attributed positive characteristics to 'getting it right' and negative characteristics to 'getting it wrong'.

Where personal fixations exist, prejudice emerges. So with a view that making mistakes herself is bad management practice, she also projected this out onto other managers by showing prejudice towards those who openly admitted to the mistakes that they made. She consequently did not have a good relationship with the particular manager in question.

From separating to integrating

- If we see them as 'or' we separate
- If we see them as 'but' we separate
- If we see them as 'and' we integrate.



Integrating extremes does not mean loss of extremes, it means fully owning all aspects of yourself. It is not 'sitting on the fence', being neither one nor the other. It means exploring and acknowledging your own potential. In doing so, you recognise the potential in others. I have found in my own development that this is not always easy and that when I am working in an environment that does not support my fallibility then I find it hard to challenge my beliefs and my own behaviour. When working with people who allow me to be myself 'warts and all', I feel powerful, open to learn by my mistakes, able to explore my own polarities. I have noticed that I often need to have permission to do this and to stumble a 'little, in order to own my opposites and use them in a way that is socially acceptable, ie aggressiveness meets a different response in others than assertiveness.

As a woman I have chosen to discover my assertive self (my passive self I know very well, it is a familiar pattern). Like many women I always believed that being aggressive, to me the polar opposite of passive, would be seen as unloving and uncaring, leading to me being unloved by others. I flatly denied that I could ever be aggressive.

To change has meant owning an aggressive and assertive me, which meant taking a risk that 'people might no longer love me'. I realise now that belief was ridiculous. I don't always get it right, I am improving. My willingness to learn enables me to try something different next time, or even to say "that



Integrating extremes through language

sounded a bit aggressive and I didn't mean it to sound like that". I feel much more powerful than the passive, compliant woman I used to be years ago. Paradoxically, I am much more appreciated by others in my work when I express my views openly.

We can only learn opposites through accepting them in ourselves and by taking risks. Taking risks leads to growth and change; to avoid taking risks means staying the same. That is our choice.

Integrating extremes does not mean loss of extremes, it means fully owning all aspects of yourself. It is not 'sitting on the fence' being neither one nor the other. It means exploring and acknowledging your range of potential.. In doing so you begin to recognise the potential in others.

You will have noticed the strong emphasis on language in this article. Language can carry us to great depths of understanding; exploring polarities is no afternoon ramble on the moors. I guess what I am saying is to treat polarities language with respect and to honour the depth that you might be in touch with both in yourselves and in others. Ultimately, it is through awareness that change occurs.

Language provides us with a means of challenging others in their denial of polar opposites. In the following examples, I have put in brackets useful interventions to increase awareness.

I never get angry with her but she still treats me badly. (You would challenge *never*.)

He *always* shows contempt towards me. (You would challenge *always*.)

Either we deliver today or we don't deliver at all. (You would explore other possibilities.)

We *have* to do it this way, we have no choice. (You would challenge the lack of choice.)

I *can't stand* people who are egotistic. (You would challenge the prejudice and explore their own egotism.)

Notice how the language in each statement undermines the potential

that exists. Where there is no acceptable opposite there is no room for difference; there is no room for diversity; there is no room for creativity; there is no possibility of change.

When I notice polarised extremes in people I encourage them to imagine the opposite, articulate what it would be like to be this opposite and to notice their response. I give them permission to be different and frequently find that this process is freeing, setting off a whole new set of insights that have been frozen for a long time. I encourage 'anding' instead of language that separates. For example, "I have heard your proposals *but* I have some different ideas" becomes "I have heard your proposals *and* I have some different ideas". Do you notice the difference and how the latter statement opens up the potential for bringing ideas together? Can you appreciate how the last statement promotes contact, as opposed to inducing resistance and blocked contact?



So what



about diversity?

What we have been talking about here is at the core of diversity, a familiar subject to most people and most organisations. It is not my intention to discuss at length the meaning and implications of diversity; simply to note the connection between polarities and managing diversity in the workplace.

Diversity is about appreciating difference and building on it. Not black and white, man and woman, Catholic and Jew, but the differences within ourselves and with our fellow human beings, whatever age, race or colour. Diversity is around integrating the polarities in our beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviour. Appreciating difference in others begins with recognising the range and the tapestry within ourselves; in valuing our own potential. Taking the risk to challenge ourselves and to own our prejudices.

Promoting sustainable change means offering a supportive environment where people can discover their polarities and put them into practice without recrimination or discrimination; to bring their potential into their work; to be accepted for who they are 'warts and all'. Because *their* warts are *our* warts.

The paradox of change

Change is the very basis of existence and the natural process of the Universe. Change is happening all the time. The apparent (illusory) idea we might have that things stay the same is due entirely to the simple fact that we use most of our energy resisting change and trying to keep things the same. Change is not something that we do or don't do. It's not something that we make happen, but we can influence the process of change.

Change is the
natural result of
being aware

When we start to reclaim our authentic selves we will reach a point where the forces for further change will meet the forces against change. In Gestalt we call this the *impasse*. This is the place where we need to focus our awareness, not just on the forces for change but also on the forces against change. We need to be crystal clear



about what both sides of the impasse mean for us. And it is from this clarity that we can move forward.

I often meet the 'impasse' in organisations. Change management, if this is not a contradiction in terms, is all about the way in which we focus our awareness on the 'impasse'. The first step is to value the positions for change and to value the positions against change. There should be no battle between those in favour of change and those against change. Change is going to happen anyway. What we are concerned with is how are we best able to adapt to change and deal with the impacts created by it.

Embracing confusion and frustration

In the third article in this series Sue Clayton talked about the importance of confusion as the growing edge of our learning. This is never more true than when we are dealing with an 'impasse'. We will be confused by the opposing forces for and against. This confusion may be uncomfortable and unless we embrace it as a necessary path to greater clarity it will get more and more uncomfortable.

We may also find the process of change frustrating. Three steps forward - two steps back, is a common experience. This frustration that I feel is in fact a signal, a measure of my need to be real and to see what isn't being seen, to hear what isn't being heard, and to say what isn't being said. When I feel frustrated then I know it has to be 'business as unusual'.

Avoiding confusion and frustration keeps me stuck where I am. It keeps me at the 'impasse'.

It was my third coaching session with the chief executive when we hit the 'impasse'. During the session he said:

"I realise that I need to deal with this issue differently, but I just can't do it, in fact I'm not going to do it."

"What is that that you don't want to do?" I asked.

"I don't want to sacrifice the years of work building this organisation the way it is," he replied.

"How could you sacrifice all those years?" was my next question.

He then said: "If we change our approach now it will seem that all that effort is wasted."

"What in particular would you be sorry to lose?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. I think it would be the sense of stability and continuity," was his response.

"So how would you like to see things develop and still keep the stability and continuity?" I asked.

"Well, we could incorporate the old company logo in the proposed new one and . . ." he answered.

The session continued in this vein. Nothing was resolved and the chief executive did not yet have the clarity that was needed. However, there was a greater degree of awareness and the 'impasse' was less difficult to face.



Chasing change is like chasing rainbows



The wonderful thing about rainbows is that you can see them so clearly, including where they start and finish, but you can never get to the end of them. Chasing change is like that. The first thing that happens just as you are about to score is that the goal posts move. And they will keep moving.

We exist in the now, in this moment. What happens immediately becomes the past and we don't know what is going to happen next. When we try to look into the future we do so from where we are and by the time the future arrives we are somewhere else. This doesn't mean that planning is a waste of time. What it does mean is that we have to be ready to adapt our plans as things change.

Perhaps the frustration that this creates tempts us to chase after change and to try to freeze what is happening long enough for our plans to come to fruition. Unfortunately this is not possible. Chasing change in this way is just as useful as chasing rainbows.

We can try to stand still and resist change, but this doesn't work either. So what can we do?



Change is unmanageable

Paradoxically, what we can do is accept that change is unmanageable. If we accept this then we have to change our focus to becoming more aware of the changes that are happening and their impact on our world. By doing this we can change our approach from one that seeks to chase and manage change to one that seeks to understand and react to change as it happens.

I exist and interact with my environment, my field, in the best way I can to meet my needs. My field is continually changing as new people and new experiences come into it. If I am not aware of how my field is changing then the way I react is limited. If I choose to pretend that my field is not changing then I become stuck. I cannot 'manage' the way my field changes; there are far too many external factors out of my sphere of influence.



What I can do is to try to be aware of how my field is changing and the extent of the choices I have about what I focus on, ie in Gestalt terms what becomes 'figure' for me. This then makes it possible for me to engage with my world in a way that enables me to follow my natural process flow and satisfy my needs.

When I work with change in organisations this is what I do. I focus on the field and how it is changing, and then on what might become figure, and ways that the organisation can react to complete the cycle and reach satisfaction. The results of this approach can be significant.



Embracing change

When we accept that change is a continuous process that we cannot manage, our focus changes to understanding what is happening and how we can react. This is what we call 'going with the flow'.

Instead of looking at events in terms of, 'This is not turning out as expected' (it would be a miracle if it was), you could look at events in terms of, 'This is what is happening, so what shall we do?' This is quite a big change from traditional approaches of trying to control events so that they meet expectations.

We can plan and fantasise about the future. We can dream and have expectations, why not? This is fine as long as it doesn't block our awareness that change is constantly happening. It is not the planning we do which influences the choices we make, it is our awareness about what is happening at this moment that determines what we do.

What we need is trust not thrust

If we embrace change and learn to adapt and react in the best way we can to satisfy our needs then we can trust the process and need not fear change.

If, on the other hand, we believe that we can control and manage change then we will have little option other than to *thrust* forward and try to make change happen the way we want it to and in so doing we will carry the fear of it not working.

The paradox is that by trusting to the process and being aware of what is happening, change just is.

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