

Venturing Out

- discussion, debate and dialogue

'All real living is meeting.'

-Martin Buber

In meeting the other we meet our self

It is in meeting 'the other' that we come to meet ourselves. This seems paradoxical but in meeting someone who is different to ourselves we come to see who we are. How many times have we not really known about where our boundaries and edges are until they have been challenged? It is often when we meet someone different to us, that we start to question and find out what we ourselves think and the reasons for this. And so like in so much of Christian teaching we encounter a truth within a paradox (the birth of Jesus of a virgin, the first being the last, the weakest being the strongest, dying to live etc.) – that in encountering 'the other' we encounter our self.

It can be particularly difficult to meet those who have a significantly different worldview to ourselves because the differences can be so great. And with such differences we are generally forced to question why we do the things the way we do and why we believe the things we do. This can be an uncomfortable process as such questioning often goes to the heart of who we are and can shake our very foundations. And yet if we are to grow to understand ourselves then it is these very encounters with people who are different to ourselves that we need. Being able to genuinely meet the other without looking to defend or attack but simply to meet the other is not an easy task. It requires healthy 'contact'.

The Gestalt concept of 'contact'

The understanding of difference and 'contact' in Gestalt theory is useful to us thinking about and experimenting with engaging with those who have significantly different worldviews to ourselves.

'Ordinarily, "contact" means to connect, to meet, or to join. [...] Gestalt therapists use contact in a way which includes this meaning of meeting and refines it.

Contact is a quality of awareness that involves the meeting of differences. [...] Contact is the experience of difference. Without difference, there is no contact. If you touch your own fingers, you will feel in one finger the pressure of the other. If you do not, you will not feel the meeting--there is no contact. For contact, there must be the experience of difference. Think of this as a perspective on personal relations: In order for people to meet, they must touch where they are different. Without knowing how we are different, there is no relationship, because relating must involve two. (An application of this: A couple in which each partner is trying to be like the other is avoiding contact, avoiding relationship.)'¹

¹ The Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy <http://www.aagt.org/html/contact.html>



For us to be able to enter into healthy contact with people from different backgrounds it requires us to be able to deal to be true to our own experience as well as to reach out to those with whom we are in dialogue. This not an easy balance and there are many subtle ways that we tend to avoid 'contact', often because we do not want to offend people. It seems that we either say what we think and risk offending others. Or don't say what we think and sometimes feel we have lost our integrity.

Table 1 (below) on contact styles should help to understand how we can seek healthy contact as well as how we avoid contact. It is useful to use this table to think about how you engage with people who are different with you, how you make good contact as well as the times when you shy away from making contact. In becoming more aware of the reasons behind it you may be able to develop ways of coming into more healthy contact in the future.

The importance of questions

In initiating healthy contact, the art of developing open questions is of particular importance. In asking questions one is able to keep enquiring and staying in contact without necessarily agreeing with someone and what they are saying. Adopting a spirit of enquiry so that one can better understand the other's position will not only help you to engage with what the other person(s) believe but will help you to see more accurately where you are different and should help you to relate on the facts rather than get into arguments.

The importance of relationship

Relationship is the environment in which tends to support healthy contact. In relationship we are less likely to take resistance to our opinions and beliefs as negative and threatening. This level of trust needs to be built up over time.

Experimenting with contact and supporting yourself

Good, healthy contact is something that has to be nurtured – it is not just something that we can choose to enter into when we wish. The following may help to nurture your ability to develop good, healthy contact:

Developing a knowledge of your own faith tradition – in developing a good knowledge of your own faith tradition you feel more secure in your own faith and more able to face challenges to your faith which may be presented.

Church – Church is a place where you are brought into contact with people who are different to you. It is a good place to 'experiment' with the contact that you make with other people, particularly those who are really quite different to yourself.

Intimate relationships - Intimate relationships (family, partners, close friends) are the place where we are nurtured and where there hopefully is high levels of trust to support where contact can be made with others.



Knowing your limitations and respecting others' limitations – All of us are limited and certain times are more fragile and less open to contact than at other times. The suggestion here is not that we should always make contact but that we should become more aware of the contact or lack of contact that we are making and the reasons for this. Sometimes contact is also confused with domination or antagonism – in other words a predominantly one way process. This is not the case. It requires a sensitivity to the other and their needs. Many people have negative associations with certain types of contact and it is very important to respect this. Contact is a slow, reciprocal process which requires awareness of your self and your reactions as well as the reactions of the other.

Proportionate risks – developing your 'contact sense' – Contact is not a science and so it is something which we can experiment with and develop our awareness of how it affects us and other people. Small risks can be taken which may then lead to greater confidence in making contact and removing blocks to contact.

Prayer – Prayer can be a way that we become more aware of our own needs of contact and submitting those concerns or fears that we have about being in contact to God. Prayer itself is an intimate form of contact with God and it should perhaps serve as the touchstone for all other contact that we have with other people.

STYLE	AVOIDANCE OF CONTACT	CREATIVE FORCE
Desensitisation	Tuning out; dulling the senses	Managing the flow of harmful information from the environment
Deflection	Pushing awareness and experience aside	Providing relief; allowing for levity; allowing for relaxation
Projection	Attributes my perceptions/awareness/judgement on to someone else	Being imaginative and creative; showing empathy
Introjection	Unconditional acceptance of things from the environment 'swallowing whole without chewing'	Learning by using others' examples; modelling successful people and mentors
Retroflection	Tendency to absorb major responsibility- e.g. turning conflict energy inside and against self instead of letting yourself express emotions	Survival to protect self; not yielding to inappropriate actions (shouting in a meeting)



Confluence	Losing self identity, denying differences between self and environment	Offering support peace and harmony
Egotism	Objectify and distancing what is happening to you –(turning it into a sociological study!)	Standing back to analyse a situation

** Note – For further information on each of the different contact styles see http://www.aagt.org/html/contact_boundary_disturbances.html

Questions and Reflections

1. How do you respond to Martin Buber’s statement that, “All real living is meeting”?
2. What are the risks of making ourselves vulnerable in an encounter with someone from a different faith tradition? What are the gains?
3. What can we learn about meeting and encounter from the expel of Jesus?

Reading and Resources

J Barber, *‘Good Question! The Art of Asking Questions To Bring About Positive Change’* Lean Marketing Press, Great Yarmouth 2005
D Bohm, *‘On Dialogue’* Routledge, Oxford 1996
Martin Buber *‘I and Thou’* Continuum International Publishing 2004
Martin Buber *‘Between Man and Man’* Routledge 2008
S Ginger *‘Gestalt Therapy: The Art of Contact’* Karnac Books, London 2007
W Isaacs *‘Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together’* Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, London 1999
M Wheatley *‘Turning to One Another’* Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco 2002

