

REVIEWS AND REFLECTIONS

Review: *The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life* by Daniel N. Stern, M.D. New York: W.W. Norton & Company (Norton Series on Interpersonal Neurobiology), 2004.

The World is a Grain of Sand

Daniel Stern, M.D., explores the world of experience with a deeply humane sensibility. With a gentleness and grace that puts me in the mind of the cinema of François Truffaut or the novels of Marcel Proust, Stern keeps alive a child's appreciation of life's everyday miracles, while developing complex and compelling models of thinking in the field of psychotherapy.

Emergences in the *Zeitgeist* have a way of moving theorists from various theoretical traditions in parallel directions; it is remarkably true that Stern, a leading psychoanalyst, pursues theoretical constructs and concepts that mirror many of those on the scene of contemporary Gestalt therapy. Stern is cited regularly among leading theorists in contemporary Gestalt therapy (e.g., Philippson [2009], Staemmler [2009], Wheeler [2002], Yontef [1996/2003]). For example, in Peter Philippson's (2009) important new book, *The Emergent Self: An Existential-Gestalt Approach*, Stern's work is woven deeply into the fabric of its theoretical cloth. Stern shares with classical Gestalt therapy a grounding in phenomenology, an appreciation of conscious experience, and the elaboration of awareness in the present moment. He shares with contemporary Gestalt therapy a deep involvement with intersubjectivity (the ability to meet, mirror, and empathize with the other's experience) and the interpersonal dimensions of development. In a further, more personal connection with Gestalt therapy, Stern writes movingly about a "moment of meeting" he shared with Gestalt therapist Margherita Spagnuolo-Lobb to illustrate the exploration of the *impact* of an interpretation. In Gestalt terms, Stern here is exploring, in the lively present, the experience of a powerful moment of I-Thou meeting and contact. Interpretation is not the *sine qua non* of the therapy; instead, interpretation is secondary to the experience of present moment contact.

The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life has the feel of theory building that is deeply personal, yet it never fails to be rigorous in its

philosophical, scientific, and applied psychotherapeutic grounding. The present moment for Stern consists of a very short time span—between one and ten seconds. This length of time is connected with the rhythm of the breath. Stern's present moment occurs in approximately the length of time each person takes to speak a phrase in conversation. Another way to think of Stern's "present moment" is the time it takes to sing a musical phrase. For example, the first few lines of Paul McCartney's "Yesterday" might be understood as unfolding in the following present moments of time:

- Yesterday (present moment #1);
- All my troubles seemed so far away (present moment #2);
- Now it looks as though they're here to stay (present moment #3).

Stern takes the phenomenal reality of "small but meaningful affective happenings that unfold in the seconds that make up the now" (p. 8) as the starting point for psychotherapy. For Stern, micro-moments contain the richness of the macro-issues of the individual's life, for "they capture a sense of the subject's style, personality, preoccupations or conflict, in other words, their experience of the past. Each moment is psychodynamically relevant" (p. 16).

Stern's "present moment" is not the ongoing, ineffable, present centeredness of Lao Tzu, The Buddha or Ram Dass. Instead, it is an ordinary, bite-sized slice of experience. When that moment is held between therapist and client, the client experiences a shared present moment, and intersubjectivity begins. Indeed, this book is as much about intersubjectivity as it is about the present moment. Stern considers intersubjectivity to be not only vital to the method of psychotherapy but also a basic human motivational system—as basic as sexuality and attachment. With regard to the concept of intersubjectivity, Stern simplifies while deepening. I find his way of conceptualizing intersubjectivity to be less abstract, more immediate, and more like Gestalt therapy's contact cycle than that of Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood (2000); in my reading, at least, the latter deals more with the broad relational and transference issues of intersubjectivity than with the contact that is unfolding in the present moment.

One fascinating assertion that Stern makes is that intersubjectivity and attachment are separate modes of interconnection: people may be decidedly non-intersubjective in their interpersonal contact, yet form deep attachments. This may shed light on why a client with an Asperger's presentation may be impaired in the capacity for intersubjective contact, but may form an attachment to the therapy group. On several occasions, in long-term groups, I have encountered certain clients who have formed significant attachments to the group and its members, but who have had great difficulty with inter-

subjectivity: with the ability to meet, mirror, and empathize with the other's experience. Stern's distinguishing the capacity for intersubjectivity from the capacity for attachment has given me greater empathy and ability to work with these clients in group therapy.

Another fascinating idea that Stern explores in this book is "Sloppiness." Sloppiness is a wonderfully supportive concept for any Gestalt therapist such as me, one who has an overly active Top Dog. This concept derives from Stern's research that utilizes the observation of psychotherapy with his colleagues at The Boston Change Process Study Group. Sloppiness refers to disorderliness in the clinical hour. Stern reports from his research that there is much fuzziness, lack of clarity, and a "hit-miss-repair-elaborate" dance between therapist and client that shows up clearly in the observation of psychotherapy—even in the observation of senior clinicians—especially when the observer is focusing on the present moment as it moves along. Stern points to the creative potential that is implicit in Sloppiness. As two minds enter into intersubjectivity, the meeting of those minds entails much that is unknown and misapprehended (Sloppiness). That very Sloppiness in turn lays the ground for the emergence of new experiences, which hold the potential for new awareness and growth for the client. I find the concept of Sloppiness an expectable, indeed an essential, part of the process, a source of self-support in working with individuals, couples, and groups. When confronted with a particularly Sloppy moment of group therapy leadership, I have found it reassuring to remember a thought from Erving Polster (1995): "What *is* will soon be something new" (p.173). If "what *is*" is Sloppy and held with contactful awareness, we lay the ground for something new to emerge as the group moves together through the "Present Moment."

One final thought: I can imagine Gestalt therapists giving *The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life* a big yawn, with the dismissive comment that from Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman (1951) on down, Gestalt therapy thinkers have already covered this ground and it is not "news to us." While there may be some truth to this, I commend this book to Gestalt therapists, and indeed to therapists of all stripes, because Stern is a fine thinker who brings a distinctive flavor, original thinking, and passion to his subject.

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REFLECTIONS

POEMS

LETTING GO

Pull some thread of certainty through the keyhole of doubt
A thin link to some truth that eludes
Twist a rope of it and tie together
Those few unquestioned principles you can find
Build this raft to carry yourself out upon the sea
Of circumstances that surround
Convince yourself that flimsy as your craft may be
Lashed to this framework,
You can survive

Or, let go of the need for safety to discover the buoyancy
Of sometimes just letting it happen

— Claire Dennery Stratford, LCSW (1929-2010)
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