

The Transformative Breath of Universal Perichoresis – Reawakening of Primordial Experience in
Contemplative Gestalt Group Therapy
Khor Su Hean (josephkhor@gmail.com)

This paper tries to address the social needs of liquid modernity, the lacking of solid ground and relational support due to the rapid changes and the focus on individualization and differentiation (Bauman, 2000). The universal wisdom that can be found in different cultures may provide an answer to this fragmented world.

Laozi and Heraclitus assert that Tao/Logos is the Principle of cosmos – the unity of opposites. They acknowledge that all beings are interconnected in Tao/Logos, and all things will flourish together with appropriate characteristics by adhering to this interconnected reality.

In Christianity, this unity of all beings is an expression of the Trinity. In “Laudato Sî”, Pope Francis (2015) affirms that Trinitarian God imprinted Trinitarian dynamism in all creatures, “Everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity.” (Francis, 2015, p. 174). In fact, Congar (1974, as cited in Groppe, 2004) asserts that the mystery of the Trinity can illumine human psychological structure and social relationship; we are created in the image of Trinitarian God: a communion of persons. “The human person grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures” (Francis, 2015, p. 175).

The Fathers of the Church used perichoresis to express the mutual indwelling and interpenetration of the three Persons in the Trinity. This reality of co-existence of individuality and collectivity provide us a new perspective to deal with the problems of liquid society. Saint John of the Cross describes the Trinitarian perichoresis as the exchange of breath (Holy Spirit) among the Father and the Son, and human is granted this capacity to exchange breath with the Father and enter into this perichoretic reality. “The Holy Spirit elevates the soul sublimely and informs and makes her capable of breathing in God the same spiration of love that the Father breathes in the Son and the Son in the Father”(John of the Cross, Kavanaugh, & Rodriguez, 1991, pp. 622–623). In contemplative practice, we learn to contemplate and experience this Trinitarian perichoresis, and to reach communion with God and other beings for mutual enrichment.

Gestalt Therapy shared this unitary perspective. “ Where there is no contact there is no self, where there is little contact there is little self, where there is full contact there is full self” (McLeod, 1993, p. 26). This perspective not limited in Gestalt Therapy, but almost all modern psychological theories support this, though they may have differences in other aspects. Furthermore, this perspective also supported by new discoveries in neuroscience studies. Panksepp & Biven (2012) assert that the structure and function of the mind and brain are shaped by experiences, especially emotional relationships. In fact, Daniel Siegel the founder of interpersonal neurobiology affirms that positive relationships are powerful tools for individual and societal transformations (Llosa, 2011).

We integrated contemplative practice and Gestalt Therapy in a 8 sessions group therapy, which last for two months. This empirical group research was conducted in Hong Kong, 2018, with the goal of enhancing participants' awareness of interconnected reality and enhance their contact with the environment in real life. 29 adults were recruited and divided into 3 groups with an identical semi-structured group program.

Pre-group and post-group quantitative research were conducted with all group members. There were significant dropped in the levels of anxiety, depression, and self-judgment in group members, whereas, the levels of empathy, self-kindness, and mindfulness state improved, after Contemplative Gestalt group therapy. The qualitative research involved 15 participants, either in individual interview or focus group, and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was employed. The qualitative findings show that most of the group members aware of breathing as expression of relationships and the unitary nature of beings, regardless the religious backgrounds. This experience also motivated them to establish meaningful contact with others in real life.

References:

Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge Polity Press.

Francis. (2015). *Laudato Si'*. Retrieved October 27, 2015, from http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

Groppe, E. T. (2004). *Yves Congar's theology of the Holy Spirit*. New York: Oxford University Press.

John of the Cross, S., Kavanaugh, K., & Rodriguez, O. (1991). *The collected works of Saint John of the Cross*. Washington: ICS Publications.

Llosa, P. De. (2011). THE Neurobiology OF " We ." *Parabola*, 68–75.

McLeod. (1993). The Self in Gestalt Therapy Theory. *The British Gestalt Journal*, 2, 25–40.

Panksepp, J., & Biven, L. (2012). *The archaeology of mind : neuroevolutionary origins of human emotions*. New York: W.W Norton.