

The Process of Presence: Energetic Availability and Fluid Responsiveness

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Abstract: Who has presence and how can we recognise it? How does it feel to be present or with someone with presence? Can we learn to be more present? This article discusses some of these issues and aims to provide a more tangible perspective on presence; challenging the mystery surrounding the word as well as the imprecise use of the term in both the organisational and psychotherapeutic worlds. We begin by articulating the phenomenology of presence and offering a view of the process of presence, defined herein as ‘energetic availability and fluid responsiveness’. We look at how this generic view of the process of presence, inspired by Gestalt psychotherapy theory, reverberates with a variety of ideas and concepts from the worlds of philosophy and science.

Key words: presence, presencing, relational, consulting, charisma, authenticity, flow.

Introduction

Our motivation to write this paper stems directly from a series of conversations we have had while working as co-trainers in both the psychotherapeutic and organisational sphere. In both arenas, we have found ourselves attending to the notion of ‘presence’ as it occurs, and is currently employed, within Gestalt psychotherapy theory and practice. There would seem to be a great deal of confusion regarding whether presence is a qualitative and/or a quantitative phenomenon. For example, both of us overhear trainers, trainees, and ourselves making observations such as ‘she’s got a lot of presence’, ‘he’s got a very strong presence’, ‘you were very present at that moment’, and so on. It seemed to us that this rather sloppy use of the term required further clarification and explanation, and subsequently we engaged in a series of conversations aimed at developing our thinking.

In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of papers, books, and discussion documents that have considered the topic of presence. For example, and to name a few, Senge *et al.* (2005) see presence as including a ‘full conscious awareness’, ‘deep listening’ and ‘letting go of old identities and the need to control’, and view ‘all these aspects of presence as leading to a state of “letting come”, of consciously participating in a larger field for change’ (2005, p. 13). In leadership theory, presence seems to be at the heart of what is called ‘charismatic leadership’ (Weber, 1947; Peters and Waterman, 1982; Bryman, 1992). Scharmer,

a well-respected organisational consultant, writes of an active use of being present or ‘presencing’ as ‘... to use your highest self as a vehicle for sensing, embodying and enacting emerging futures’ (2000, p. 1), and how ‘presencing’ as an approach can be used to facilitate innovation and change processes within organisations.

This small selection of references from the organisational literature left us feeling somewhat surprised and confused. On the one hand, presence seemed to be a qualitative attribute of the self, somewhat similar to charisma (of which more later). Alternatively, the concept is formulated as an active and present-centred use of self as ‘an instrument of change’ that can be employed both within a relational context and also a physical environment. Finally, presence can also be used to imply a somewhat ‘new age’, possibly transpersonal channel through which inspiration and emerging futures could be envisaged.

In practical terms, although we were mystified, we were also intrigued. We found ourselves wondering about Alan Sugar’s (founder of Amstrad and a British businessman) higher self, and George Bush’s charisma!

Juliet Denham’s (2006) article in the *British Gestalt Journal* was timely and provided us with an additional stepping-stone in our discussions. Denham focuses on five aspects of presence for Gestalt psychotherapy trainers: being present, being authentic, maintaining creative indifference, practising inclusion, and attuning to the field. She points out that while presence can be ‘... felt and recognised, it is hard to convey its full depth and richness’ (Denham, 2006, p. 16). Denham nonetheless

confirms our experience that, given the concept is so elusive and hard to define, there is remarkable consensus concerning who has it, what particular aspects of presence an individual has, and its utility as a vehicle for change. Although a number of writers (e.g. Smith, 2003; Hycner, 2005; Zinker, 1987) all agree that presence has more of a quality of *being* than *doing*, we found ourselves frustrated by the notion that this concept was therefore something of the ‘sacred cow’ of Gestalt theory. We could all name it, describe it and talk about it, yet when it came to clear theoretical exposition of what it was, how to teach or develop it, and how to use it, somewhat mysterious and obtuse processes set in.

We therefore set ourselves the task of trying to generate and extrapolate a definition of presence that was more generic than context-specific. We presumed that presence as a Gestalt trainer might feel and look rather the same as presence in another context. In addition, our dialogues led us to want to write about presence by drawing on a multitude of perspectives: from phenomenological and experiential viewpoints to philosophical and scientific ideas. All of these we believe act like facets of a diamond to convey the multi-dimensional aspect of presence and its broad applicability.

In this article therefore, we will describe our own experiences of feeling and being present before offering a view of the *process* of presence, which we define as ‘energetic availability and fluid responsiveness’. This view is inspired from phenomenology and Gestalt psychotherapy theory and incorporates metaphors and analogies from the physical world around us.

The Phenomenon of Presence

Although initially presence can seem an ethereal notion to capture, it made sense to us as Gestalt practitioners to start by reflecting in detail on our own phenomenal experience. What did we know about being with people with presence and being present ourselves? How were we impacted? What did it feel like?

Being With Presence

Being with presence holds an intense attraction. It is a feeling of having captured the interest of the other and having been given it easily. ‘I notice you noticing me, and I feel seen.’ Meeting people with presence arouses a sense of having their full attention, of being attentively listened to and met in a way that is deeply entrancing. At its strongest, being with someone else’s presence is an experience of the relationship being a totally satiating, figural phenomenon that eclipses ground. Theoretically, this can be seen as a moment of full/final contact which Latner refers to in a wonderfully evocative piece of writing, in which he quotes Perls *et al.*, as ‘the figural

object “becomes a Thou” . . . In this timeless moment one is in love with it’ (2005, p. 110).

We found this description to be graphic in its explication of our shared experience of being with presence; the feeling that the other has the ability and capacity to understand and hold all that I am in that moment, and that which I give freely unto the other. This description of profound, often wordless connection, can, of course, be compared to Buber’s notion of an ‘I-Thou’ meeting, described by Hycner (in Hycner and Jacobs, 1995, p. 9), as ‘an embrace of gazes’. According to Friedman, this type of meeting ‘unifies the person’s soul’ (1976, p. 97), as it contains an ontic dimension that is central to what it means to be human: that is, that we feel both met and confirmed by another. Buber states, ‘this instinct is something greater than the believers in the “libido” realise: it is the longing for the world to become present to us as a person’ (1965, p. 88).

Considering this, we reflected that our experience of being with presence contains an implicit expectation of solidity, of the other being well resourced, or certainly resourced enough for what I may need now. Hence, a therapist may be tired and still be present enough for her client; a manager may be exhausted and yet still be inspiring for her staff. It is thus a quality of resource and resilience, of being confident in one’s ground as sufficient to be dealing with the present moment, rather than purely a description of high, energetically focused attention to task. We reflected that there is also an embodied aspect of being with presence that manifests itself mostly in those who practise martial arts, dance, or other forms of physical activity. It is a quality of being grounded, fully alert and yet apparently still. There is a sense of stability in the way people with embodied presence move; at ease in their own bodies as if their centre of gravity was steady and that ‘what is thrown at them, won’t throw them’.

The description of presence as solidity may at first seem in contradiction to Yontef’s (1993) definition of presence, inspired by Buber, as allowing oneself to be ‘impacted’ by the other. Yet, solidity for us means being impacted enough to feel and confirm a client’s subjective perspective of their reality, but not *too* impacted or overwhelmed.

In terms of ‘being with presence’, we hypothesised that this occurred when we were on the receiving end of the practice of inclusion. For example, my therapist being emotionally able to hear my story, being deeply affected by the way my life touches aspects of her own, and yet still being focused on me as the primary figure of her attention. In an organisational setting, this may mean my manager acknowledging my huge struggle in achieving my goals, and yet still being the person who has to take responsibility for challenging me to keep working towards them.

Finally, being with presence also carries a feeling of effortlessness, an impression that individuals are not working hard but are easily undertaking their current activity. When watching a facilitator we judged to ‘have’ presence, we noted feelings of interest and being drawn to respond and engage in what they offered; noting the embodied skill that they bring to their task that made it look easy.

The Experience of Being Present

Reflecting on what we had both individually experienced while ‘being present’, there was a sense of taking responsibility for myself and for my engaging with what is around me; yet holding a porous boundary in my contact with others. This could be described as a state of being grounded or centred from which I can choose to just ‘be’; or feel moved to act and intervene.

What anchors and liberates me is the confidence of knowing who I am in this context and what I am trying to do or achieve. When facilitating a workshop, worrying about the content of what I am delivering restricts me in attending fully to what is happening around me. When the knowledge of what I am trying to demonstrate and convey is part of my integrated learning, I become freer to attend to the new, freer to meet the other. Nevis (1987), in his book on organisational consulting, describes presence as the living embodiment of knowledge as it includes one’s personal assumptions, believed to be essential to bring about change and influence.

Presence, therefore, is often not just about ‘being’. I clearly have an agenda when consulting and facilitating, one of influencing others and sharing what I know, see, and notice. Similarly, as a therapist, I am not just meeting my client but also attending to their growth, helping them to address the issues with which they have come to me. Addressing this point, Buber (1967) is very clear that it is the responsibility of the therapist to meet the client; the dialogue is not fully mutual. Similarly, Erving and Miriam Polster (1973) argue that therapists need to establish an interactive climate within which a client can begin to work.

There is therefore an inherent tension derived from carrying out a task and working towards an outcome, while holding to an attitude of ‘creative indifference’ (Perls, 1947/1969). How is it possible to be unattached to outcome, fully in the moment, and yet have an agenda? What difference emerges if the agenda is fully transparent and understood by all? What if I cannot resist being invested in the success of any single outcome?

We would propose that it is in this combination of fully ‘being-while-doing’ that the dialectical synthesis of ‘will’ and ‘grace’ becomes manifest. Here, ‘will’ can be defined as ‘directed action’, or taking initiative, and

‘grace’ as a quality of ‘receptivity’ and surrender (see Denham-Vaughan, 2005, for a full discussion). Consciously, I am fully attending to the present moment, have an awareness of knowledge and information that I have learnt, and am ready to respond with information or action if required by the moment to do so. My agenda is to be fully available in that moment and as responsive to the needs of the situation as I can be. This experience can best be described as the combination of experiencing an *energetic* availability for contact and meeting, combined with an internal steadiness and resourcefulness. This state has also been termed ‘flow’ by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) who characterises it by a feeling of energised focus, full involvement, and success in the process of an activity.

As shown in the table below, this state can be captured in the combination of energetic availability and fluid responsiveness. It is a wholly relational concept as applied to the current environment and lived moment. It cannot be rehearsed, and yet it must be planned for, in so far as one musters all of one’s resources prior to setting out on a trip.

	Energetic Availability	Fluid Responsiveness
As I experience presence in others	<i>Feeling deeply attracted by presence in others. Feeling noticed and seen by the other.</i>	<i>Feeling held/safe and with a person who is well resourced.</i>
As I experience my own presence	<i>Alert yet calm. Attentive to, and connecting with, others.</i>	<i>Knowing what I know liberates me to focus on others, on the new.</i>

Authenticity of Presence

Based on the phenomenal experiences and observations described above, presence seems to enfold the dualities of being and acting, stillness and movement, availability and responsiveness. The holding of these polarities reminds us of Perls *et al.*’s middle mode of functioning where ‘the spontaneous is both active and passive, both willing and done to’ (1951/1994, p. 154). Presence has that same quality. It feels effortless in its doing yet is receptive in its being. It is about giving ourselves over fully to the experience of being with others and ourselves. There is no sense of pretence or worry about doing or performing. ‘It is the experience which athletes these days are coming to call “the zone”, when everything goes well, easily. We feel unified, balanced, whole, thoroughly attuned to what we are doing, what we are involved with’ (Latner, 1992, p. 43).

Unlike the middle mode of being, however, which can be found while participating in any activity from

playing sports to reading a book, presence is about engaging with ourselves *and* others. As such, it is a deeply relational activity, concerned with the indivisible being of ourselves being with others. As previously mentioned, within Gestalt psychotherapy theory this closely relates to the concept of 'inclusion', and raises the problem of *how* to be fully myself, open to others and affected by them, while ensuring the contact is therapeutic.

We concluded that reflecting on the phenomenology of presence was therefore deeply ontological. We needed to describe a way of being, of taking hold of ourselves, combined with full awareness of the synthesis of our 'inner' and 'outer' worlds. In the writings of Heidegger (1962) and Sartre (1948), we found philosophical perspectives that helped sharpen our thinking about this process.

In his book *Being and Time* (1962), Heidegger rejects the traditional Cartesian notion of the self as a self-contained ego and the ensuing duality of mind and body. Heidegger replaces the self as 'subject' with the self as '*Dasein*'. The term *Dasein* translates from its regular German usage into English as 'being there', 'human existence' or 'presence'. The essential features of *Dasein* include *existence*, *facticity*, and *fallenness*.

For Heidegger, fully 'authentic' existence is the process of *becoming* one's possibilities, and emerges when human beings fulfil their potential in the world. This needs to be accomplished within the historically conditioned environment that one is born into, and that continually limits our horizons; the limitations Heidegger refers to as *facticity*. Authenticity is therefore a state of being that is active, congruent, contemplative, dynamic, and teleological – an agency burgeoning with quiescent potentiality (Guignon, 1984, 1993). This must be carefully differentiated from 'fallenness', where *Dasein* is absorbed in idle talk, ambiguity and the everydayness of living; of following the masses and doing what others expect us to do rather than taking hold of who we fully are. As such, fallenness can be described as a phenomenon akin to a relational view of shame. A depressing, diminution and retroflection of self in order to fit in with and conform to more powerful 'others'.

Similarly, Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness* (1948), describes 'phenomenological ontology', which distinguishes between consciousness (being for itself), and simple physical existence (being in itself). These two aspects of being, termed 'facticity' and 'transcendence', consist of all that I am and possess (facticity), combined with my imagination and ability to transcend or over-reach these facts into the future. To say 'I am transcendent' is, therefore, also to introduce the concept of an emerging future which I hope will become a fact.

It is from the exploration of this transcendent aspect

of being that Sartre drew our attention to a vital feature of what it means to be fully human. That is, we do not just focus on a figure of interest insofar as it is present in our environment; we *also* orientate towards the future, to what is missing and what is longed for. Hence, the title of his book, *Being and Nothingness*. What is absent, but may yet manifest, is therefore an important part of what is phenomenally present in one's field. Sartre gives the example of meeting Pierre in a café. When we arrive at the café ahead of Pierre, we are as aware of Pierre's absence as we would be aware of his presence if he were present. Hence, 'nothingness' (or negation) is a vital defining feature of an individual's phenomenal field and, we would argue, an essential aspect of presence; what someone is not, or not yet, as well as what they already are.

We would propose that to be vitally and authentically present is to integrate facticity and transcendence, while also being aware of the relational aspects of self that Sartre defined as 'being for others'. As we become present with another, we see ourselves captured in the other's gaze and reflected there. This was described earlier when discussing Hycner's 'embrace of gazes' and the 'I-Thou' moment. This relational and interpersonal aspect of ourselves, which comes via full and direct contact with others, is therefore a foundational element of the Gestalt notion of presence.

Practical Applications

In order to clarify these ideas and immerse them in the lived experience of Gestalt practice, we will now give an example from a recent training workshop. We offer this as an illustration of a method to explore and work with these dimensions of presence. Our experience is that this enables people to experience different aspects of presence manifested in a changing environment, and also to begin to employ presence as a vehicle for profound and radical shift and change.

At the start of a training workshop with a group of new participants, one of us (Denham-Vaughan) invited individuals to participate in a guided fantasy. The experiment offered involved an initial focusing exercise aimed at raising awareness of sensations, especially breathing and muscle tone. As people became more aware of their bodies, they were invited to allow any emerging images of colours, sounds, tastes, or smells to coalesce into an object or animal that embodied a particular quality they were aware of in that moment. Participants were then requested to introduce themselves directly to the group as if they themselves were that object or animal, prefacing the introduction with the statement 'I am a . . .'

Experimenting in this way prior to any of the traditional forms of introductory statements or comments is

encouraging participants to get in touch with the 'transcendent' part of themselves; their potentiality in this moment and this environment.

Following this, individuals were then asked initially to pair up with a person whose object or animal had a quality of presence that attracted them, and engage in a dialogue about that aspect to explore the meaning of it for themselves and for the person who had owned that quality. For example, if I had introduced myself as a 'soft cushion', I was invited to dialogue more fully about my soft cushiony qualities, both their positive and negative aspects. The individual who had been attracted to that aspect of my presence was also invited to look at what precisely had drawn their attention and desire to get closer. The group were then encouraged to move on into a large scale experiment that consisted of noticing where and how they would stand, who they would be close to, as well as the nature of the group field, given that they now fully embodied that aspect of themselves.

As we know, self is a relational process and therefore through meeting and noticing other, candidates become more aware of their new emerging qualities.

The second stage of the exercise involved individuals participating in a more traditional round of introductions, focusing on the 'facticity' of their presence. That is, their name, age, relationship status, employment, or any other aspects of their current or past living situation that they felt to be relevant and that they wanted the group to know about themselves. Once these introductions had been completed, the instructions regarding making contact with another person, having a dialogue, and participating in a group sculpt were then followed in exactly the same manner as before. Once again, participants were asked to notice the group dynamics and experience, and on this occasion to notice similarities and differences from the first sculpt.

This experiment was used to highlight theoretical aspects of presence, with both its facticity and transcendent properties, and also to demonstrate how these aspects are affected and changed by our embodied relationships with the physical environment. This experience led to discussion of 'self as process', self as an emergent function of the current field, and also the self-functions of id, ego and personality. With reference to the latter, we made suggestions that the first exercise was perhaps more likely to raise aspects of the id process, while the second exercise could stimulate awareness of ego functions and the narrative self or personality. It is important to emphasise, however, that although we use this exercise as a vehicle to raise awareness of the various self-functions, we make clear

that id, ego and personality do *not* act separately, but all emerge synergistically in the process of 'selfing' in the present moment.

Following the group sculpt of embodied positions of facticity and transcendence, a third stage of the experiment emerges. This involves the process of integration of these two aspects of presence into a coalesced sense of self, and comes from an exploration of 'being in relationship'.

Participants were now invited to pay attention to their sense of self and presence, in particular, their desires to make contact or withdraw, as they move slowly and repeatedly between the two aforementioned embodied postures. This constant movement creates an internal awareness of how presence affects relationships.

As individuals notice their own positions and other people's positions, they notice how their different presence affects how they see others and, of course, how others experience them. We use this to emphasise the impossibility of differentiating 'inner' from 'outer'; of isolating 'self' from 'field', and offer it as support for comprehending the model of 'self as process/middle-mode' within Gestalt psychotherapy theory. It demonstrates the enduring tension between separateness and connection, between 'I-Thou' and 'I-It' modes of relating, that are 'the hallmark of healthy living' (Hycner, 1985, p. 8), proffered by the Gestalt ontology.

It is important to emphasise here that we are not offering a definition of presence as Heidegger's 'authentic existence', or suggesting that Sartre's 'phenomenological ontology' can be seen as a foundation for the Gestalt notion of self as process. It is, however, interesting to note that Sartre's use of the term 'spontaneity' is very similar to that used by Goodman only three years later when writing about 'spontaneity/middle mode'. Both uses relate to a point of integration and synthesis of self that is rarely achieved, but does carry an inherent value as being an optimal, vivid, and integrated point of self-functioning. Within Gestalt therapy theory this can also be called 'full contact'. Perls *et al.* (1951) specifically note how difficult this is to describe in the English language, with English being confined to generally only active or passive verbs. In contrast, they specifically argue for this aspect of self being a point of synthesis and 'whether the self does or is done to, it refers to the process itself as a totality, it feels it as its own and is engaged in it' (Perls *et al.*, p. 155).

Similarly, what Heidegger offers us is the meshing of the essential features of *Dasein* that come into play as we encounter the world and others. In the workshop, the process of attending to my emerging, embodied, field-dependent self and my possibilities, whilst also engaging with others and what is around me, encapsulates the

process of presence. We take hold of ourselves and behave in a certain way to meet our ontic longing for authentic existence, whilst also acknowledging our facticity, limitations, and the ubiquity of human fall-*eness*. With reference to this latter concept, it is worth noting that people rarely complete the experiments described here without experiencing some degree of shame as they reveal less familiar aspects of themselves. Recognition and normalisation of this seem to provide support for people to be enabled to participate and both enjoy and benefit from the experience.

Charisma, Stage Presence, and Authenticity

We want to make a distinction here between presence, stage presence, and charisma. These terms are often used interchangeably and commonly defined as traits found in certain human personalities.

The word charisma (from the Greek word *kharisma* meaning 'gift' or 'divine favour') is often used to mean extreme charm and a 'magnetic' quality of personality and/or appearance. In short, charisma describes a seemingly uncanny ability to charm or influence people. Mahatma Gandhi, Winston Churchill, Mother Teresa, the Dalai Lama, as well as a number of celebrities and actors, are often called charismatic. Most people would agree on this without necessarily having met them in person. We would argue, however, that they do not all necessarily have presence in the sense that we conceive of it within Gestalt therapy theory and practice. The latter, we would propose, is a dynamic and relational process. Instead, what these people have in common that is so attractive to most of us is a passion for a cause, vision, energy, and courage. It is important to recognise that while this charismatic energy is often a characteristic of people with presence, it is not necessarily a *sine qua non* of the condition.

We also often hear of 'stage presence'; a quality of actors that holds audiences enchanted and captivated. We watch characters on screen or stage overcome their facticity, overcome the odds, take hold of themselves, and manifest aspects of their transcendent being. Sometimes the experience of being with this phenomenon can evoke deep longings in ourselves to be or become someone other, more, or just different. We hear the call of the as yet un-lived life and our being responds. We can be moved to tears or anger, be inspired or terrified. Potential lives are created in our minds and current aspects negated.

But is stage presence real? Are workshops real life? Do team-building exercises build real relationships? If actors are just play-acting, is it authentic? If therapists are inauthentic, who or what can the client trust? We

thought these questions about authenticity raised difficult theoretical issues for consultants and therapists.

Ultimately, an actor is following a script, however well they do it. Their performance is not spontaneous, as they play from the ground of what they already know – with little risk of losing their step or facing the unknown. Perls *et al.* in writing of the personality function of the self, distinguish it from middle mode/spontaneity and write: '... the middle mode of spontaneity does not have the luxury of this freedom, nor the feeling of security that comes from knowing what and where one is and being able to engage or not; one *is* engaged and carried along, not in spite of oneself, but beyond oneself' (1951/1994, p. 161).

This raises the fascinating question of whether a therapist or leader can ever claim to be fully 'authentic' while being fully present, as the role that one is thrown into demands an awareness of oneself and the limitations of appropriate action within a given context.

A common dilemma for organisational consultants, for instance, is how to be as authentic as possible not only in the work environment but also at the many required socialising opportunities that come with working with organisations. A celebratory dinner where my clients invite me to 'let my hair down' and join them in their celebration leaves me conflicted between wanting to engage fully in the partying after much hard work, and the realisation that there are limitations to my role as a consultant and thus to the appropriate action in these surroundings. Matters are no different for psychotherapists!

We want to distinguish here between a relational awareness of our authentic self and a full, spontaneous enactment of all that we are and could be in each moment. A woman caring for her elderly parent may well experience moments of both delight and disgust. Does choicefully retroreflecting her disgust make her any less authentic in her relationship or less present in her caring? We would say not. Indeed, to recognise these seeming inconsistencies in ourselves is also to recognise the dynamic and changing process that *is* our self. The word 'authentic' seems to hold for many expectations of being/behaving in a certain way at all times; a way that is more 'real' than another. This is, of course, incompatible with our field theoretical notion of self as process within Gestalt psychotherapy theory and does not take account of our constantly emerging relational nature.

Regrettably, we also know of cases where leaders and therapists have been engaged and then carried along 'beyond themselves' and their roles into a truly reciprocal meeting. While the outcome *may* be inspiring and miraculous, unfortunately it is equally possible that it is traumatic and/or catastrophic. There is, therefore, clearly an ethical consideration in being authentically present; one that takes account of the many choices

available to us and also the limitations placed on us while in service of the other.

Similarly, we have had all too many experiences of method-bound trainers, facilitators, managers, and leaders; people who always follow the script or agenda, and avoid any possibility of phenomena occurring spontaneously. In these cases, while energetic availability to *task* may be high, responsiveness to emergent elements in the co-created field is limited. In Sartre's terms, for these individuals, facticity is figural whilst transcendence remains very much in background. As a consequence, they are often experienced as lacking presence and unavailable for 'real' meeting. In the presence of these individuals, we have noticed drops in energy, interest, and engagement; a feeling of not wanting to take risks, and a desire to withdraw or stay well within our comfort zone.

We would argue therefore, that optimal 'use of presence' demands a detailed knowledge of that authentic aspect of self that can be categorised as 'middle mode'; a point of integration between facticity, transcendence, and 'being-for-others. It is *also* vital however, for the safety of clients, staff, leaders, and therapists, that there is adequate awareness of the roles and boundaries that are being held in that moment. Hycner sums this up saying: 'the individuality of the therapist is subsumed (at least momentarily) in the service of the dialogical' (1985, p. 33). We would argue that this calls for the authentic, spontaneous/middle mode aspect of self to be calibrated and filtered by the ego functions.

The Process of Presence

Whilst discussing the experience of presence, one of us (Denham-Vaughan) used the image of a hummingbird:

My experience is of being extremely still and yet I have a sense of vibrating with rapid frequency. I am highly aware of my physical sensations and particularly of my breathing and heartbeat. My attention is shifting rapidly from myself to the other, and to the felt sense of the nature of the embodied relationship emerging between us.

Building on this metaphor of a hummingbird, we could conceptualise the process of presence as a continuous series of minute adjustments through which we attempt to attune to both the figure and ground of our environment and phenomenal field. Through these shifts in focus, we synthesise our experience of 'inner' and 'outer', id and ego, facticity and transcendence. In particular, we are aware of doing this in the service of the other, so that our focus is intensely relational and dialogic.

Whether or not this state can be reliably produced is

of course another matter. At the heart of the paradoxical theory of change (Beisser, 1970) is the idea that aiming for a state or effect militates against the achievement of it. It is perhaps this notion that has led to the idea of presence as something ineffable and indescribable, deliverable by 'grace' alone. Nonetheless, it is quite clear to us that certain factors compromise one's chances of being/having presence. For example, being tired, physiologically stressed or unwell, having taken particular medication or excessive alcohol, being distracted or preoccupied, and equally important, having too many agendas, plans, tasks, or outcomes in mind. In addition, it *is* our experience that practice, coaching, discussion, modelling and training all help build presence. We believe, therefore, that there are elements of technical expertise that can be described, learnt, and developed and it is these areas that we now wish to explore.

Connecting Through Resonance

As we discussed the hummingbird metaphor described above, we noticed ourselves describing a process where traditional Cartesian concepts of 'inner' and 'outer' became unified. Although we, of course, recognise that Gestalt therapeutic coherence demands a 'unitary outlook' (Perls *et al.*, 1951/1994), we also recognised how difficult it is in the English language to avoid slipping into dualistic descriptions of phenomena when trying to describe them. We are both wedded to the hermeneutic view of self, where what is interpreted as internal or external is determined 'both by the categories applied and simultaneously by what is experienced' (Denham-Vaughan, 2005, p. 6).

As preparation for teaching/training, we attempted more accurately to hone our phenomenal descriptions of presence, and noted that as we wrote, it became impossible to distinguish internal from external, and likewise the boundaries of the 'present moment' also seemed to expand. We agreed that 'being present' led to an expanded experience of self, increasingly vivid perception, and a sense of what was likely to emerge before it had actually manifested. It is this facet of presence – being able to anticipate emergent properties of the phenomenal field – that is described by Scharmer (2000) in his concept of 'presencing'. He views this development of the 'intangible interior conditions' as foundational in organisational change and leadership development.

Throughout our discussions, we recognised that there is a debate to be had as to how 'presence' and 'mindfulness' might be related. Kabat-Zinn's (1994) definition of Buddhist mindfulness is widely used. He suggests it is 'a particular way of paying attention: on purpose, in the present moment, and non judgementally' (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). Although presence in

Gestalt theory includes the here-and-now noticing, it is, however, active in its noticing and raising of awareness in a relational way. Empirically, we believe that this can, and in some cases must, be differentiated from the mindfulness practice of 'noticing without judging'. As Gestalt practitioners, we found ourselves to be making numerous 'judgements' concerning what to pay attention to, what to raise awareness of, and which aspects of this data to convey to the other. In particular, when we experienced ourselves as 'most present', we were paying attention to bodily sensations and focusing on these in order to increase awareness. In this way, we hypothesised that mindfulness could be seen as a related phenomenon to 'presence'; potentially a necessary, though insufficient, condition of 'use of self as instrument', within either a psychotherapeutic or organisational consulting context.

Within our own ground in psychotherapy, it appeared that we were reaching for concepts that have been partially described in other theories (Staemmler, 2006, personal communication). In particular, the psychoanalyst Renee Spitz (1955) refers to an early developmental stage called 'coenaesthesia'. At this point, activation or stimulation in one modality also causes activation in another. There is therefore a type of cross-modal transfer of the experience of sensation, so that, for instance, what is offered as a visual stimulus may lead to predictable movements in the infant's limbs, or a movement of the mouth.

When reflecting on our experiences of being most present, we noticed that we had the odd experience of 'finding' ourselves imagining how a client smelt, or tasted, or how they might feel, as we were looking at or listening to them. These connections did not come as cognitively reasoned hypotheses, but rather as unbidden 'un-thought knows' (Bollas, 1987). There was a 'coming together' of externally gathered sensory information with internally generated sensory images, to give a vivid, synthesised view of self with other. Sometimes this could be experienced as an almost palpable sensation in the abdomen, which seemed to vibrate and act as a source of coalesced sensations which were then cognitively interpreted and fed back to the other as either a gesture or verbal statement. We speculated as to whether this could be a 'vestigial form' of Spitz's coenaesthesia, and also whether advances in neuroscience might eventually demonstrate that some people's brains might retain more coenaesthetic potential than others. Hence, the ability of 'presencing' might be more *biologically* and *viscerally* available to some individuals than others, even though all individuals can have the same degree of psychological availability. This has obvious implications for teaching and training therapists and facilitators.

Ideas developed in the fields of physics and mathe-

matics also offered us powerful images for thinking about moments of presence. We do not want to employ these concepts directly since obviously we are alert to the possibility of being reductionist and over-simplifying highly complex phenomena. Nonetheless, we were struck by the comparison of the hummingbird's 'rapidly palpating wings', sensations of a 'vibration in the abdomen', and the physical phenomenon of resonance.

All solid objects have a natural frequency or set of frequencies at which they vibrate when struck, plucked, strummed or somehow disturbed. Resonance is when one object vibrates at the same natural frequency as a second object. If one taps a tuning fork, for example, and places it near another tuning fork, the second tuning fork will resonate. This is because the vibration of the first tuning fork is the same frequency as the natural frequency of the second tuning fork. The vibrations move through the air between them and cause the second tuning fork to vibrate.

This physical phenomenon of 'resonance' can be seen as analogous to the intentional action of attuning/attending to self and other. The imperceptible to-ing and fro-ing motion can be viewed as a vibrating process whereby I attempt to come into resonant harmony with an other; this attempt to resonate being one of the defining differences between 'presence' and 'charisma'. The natural 'harmonic' achieved can provide stability, as well as a sense of equilibrium and fit; a human physical fusion. We could also hypothesise that once the harmonic is established, what emerges becomes more fluidly predictable, while disjunctions become easier to notice. This again, therefore, might help understand the experience of almost being able to predict what will be said, while being hypervigilant to differences or deviations from what is anticipated. The use of self as instrument, a term that is often applied to the use of presence, could therefore be described as 'the intended application of self to the resonance of the environment'.

Both our phenomenal experience and some scientific arenas support the view that our resonant ability might, at least partially, be a spontaneously occurring property of our embodied state.

For example, the concept of mirror neurons provides a basis for non-local effects between and among people. 'Mirror neurons' are a cluster of neurons in the brain that react when you perform an action, and also when you watch someone else perform an action. They provide the basis of our ability to 'see through other people's eyes' within our own mind. They are, according to the latest research (Ramachandran, 2000), the basis for our ability to empathise with the feelings of others as well as the basis of humans' ability to learn and adapt.

Using these theories and analogies, it is possible therefore to conceptualise presence as a state of optimal resonance to the environment. Our ‘hummingbird’ metaphor illustrates how the rapidity of oscillation between inner and outer means that the two become truly unified and the separation disappears. This has profound implications for supporting our theories as to the role of presence in dialogue and relatedness.

A Fluid Adaptive Responsiveness

Relational attunement to others in our environment, and preparation of ourselves, through direct self care, maximally to support this availability, are key elements of presence. This is not to imply, however, that an individualistic focus is synonymous with presence. Almost exactly the opposite is true. Being present, and being experienced as present, also includes a reaching out for the other, and availability to being reached.

The precise calibrations of reaching and being reached have to be individually titrated in each particular dialogic experience. What is too little contact or reach for one person may be overwhelming and dominating for another. As Jacobs states: ‘The ongoing practice of inclusion, and the ever-shifting adaptations of one’s presence, are both played out in the “between”’ (1995, p. 225).

To take the resonance metaphor further, the attributes of the outward and inward movements vary from one environment or context to the other. Figure 1 shows an illustration of this motion as a standing wave with a given frequency (*i.e.* the speed or time between the in and out motions) and amplitude (*i.e.* the amount of energy/focus or attention to the ‘In’ or ‘Out’ areas). In adapting our presence to the requirements of the environment and in response to other, we each create our own wave modified through our ego functioning. Resonance is when the to-ing and fro-ing motion between the polarities of contact and withdrawal is just right for the given conditions, and for the other.

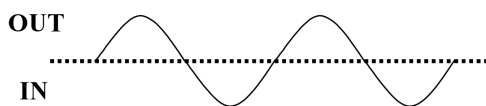


Figure 1: Standing Wave

It is in this calibration that presence, involving a use of self in the service of the other’s growth, becomes a healing vehicle rather than a charismatic adjunct of an individual self. This is where the authentic/middle mode self is employed, rather than simply allowed free rein as we moderate ourselves and strive to create optimal conditions for dialogue and meeting to occur.

Summary and Conclusion

Within this paper we have proposed a view of presence as an intentional use of self, combining energetic availability and fluid responsiveness within a dynamic relational field. We have invoked the metaphor of resonance, not as a theory of functioning, but as a different paradigm from which to review the process and phenomenology of presence.

Unlike the overwhelming view of presence as something fixed, and intrinsic to an individual (often called charm or charisma, and allied herein to the personality function), we have attempted to show that presence can be formulated as an explicit use of an individual’s authentic/middle mode self to maximise embodied and relational ‘being’. This process also involves employing specific self-functions, best described as ego functions, as certain pre-conditions facilitate the chances of these moments of selfing, often called middle mode/spontaneity, occurring and serving the current situation.

We have therefore proposed that it is possible to increase availability of presence through supportive preparations, and also through knowledge of our spontaneous self. To argue this, we borrowed from the philosophy of Heidegger and Sartre and described experiments to investigate these concepts experientially. We emphasised a need for self-support and self-care by being open and receptive to our current environment. As Gestalt therapists, this acceptance of nourishment and assimilation from the environment can be seen as maximising healthy self-functioning within changing physical and/or psychological conditions. It is in this way that we become as available as we can but also allow ourselves to be as responsive as possible. In our experience, these are the conditions within which presence can optimally occur.

As we have explained, perhaps an early misunderstanding of the Gestalt therapy view of the necessity for authentic self and ‘presence’ on the part of the therapist was illustrated by therapists simply doing and being what they experienced or wished in the moment. Over time, and with finessing of theory, relational elements have been highlighted and there has been a vastly increased awareness of the differential roles and role power that are experienced while being a therapist or a client. Attendant upon this has been acceptance of the ethical demands which this places on therapists or organisational consultants to express themselves *in the service of* the other. We would argue that this requires a moment-to-moment disciplined awareness and use of the authentic process self as a vehicle for change, rather than a totally spontaneous expression of self in the moment.

This complex definition of presence, summed up by

our description of energetic availability and fluid responsiveness, is perhaps a very powerful and potent example of why becoming a Gestalt therapist is such a demanding and challenging path. We would argue that no other form of psychotherapy asks for such rigorous *awareness* of process combined with such vigilant attention to *use* of self as process in order to provide the optimal environmental support for the client.

We would propose, therefore, that in contrast to the presence of the therapist/consultant consisting of a combination and synthesis of ego functions (the more factitious aspects of presence and middle mode/spontaneity), the presence of the client is more an amalgam and synthesis of id aspects of functioning, transcendent qualities, and middle mode/self as process. The latter allows the client more fully to associate with themes, to raise issues from ground into awareness and form connections, while the therapist's/consultant's foregrounding of ego functions allows them to titrate and calibrate their presence in the service of the client's growth. The therapist/consultant also may hold the transcendent possibilities for the client within their own phenomenal field. At times of despair, presentation of these, informed by their own embodied experience of growth and change, may provide the client with inspiration, courage, and support for stepping into the unknown.

It is a vivid illustration of the truly dialogic and horizontal nature of Gestalt therapy to attribute presence to both therapist and client. Both roles demand 'authenticity' in Heideggerian terms, and we have proposed slightly different aspects of self-functioning, synthesised with middle mode, as a vehicle for contacting this. While the role of the therapist demands 'use' of the self, the role of the client demands that they maximally 'be' themselves. The interesting paradox that we would propose is that in order fully to *use* the self, one must have had, and continue to have, many varied and rich experiences of fully *being* one's self. As Smith (2003, p. 110) states, there is a need for 'consistent, disciplined, ongoing working on oneself'. Without this, and having been seen and met in a range of varied experiences, there is always potential for inauthentic facsimiles of the therapist's/leader's role (or indeed the client's role) to be presented, as opposed to the real or authentic self. Incongruency, lack of credibility, loss of creativity, conformity, and shame are all potential outcomes of this attempt to 'fake it', or put 'presence' into a readily replicable protocol!

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