

# Continuity and Change: Gestalt Therapy Now

Volume Two in the Series  
The World of Contemporary Gestalt Therapy

Series Editor: Philip Brownell

Continuity and Change:  
Gestalt Therapy Now

The 10<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference  
of the Association for the Advancement  
of Gestalt Therapy

Edited by

Dan Bloom and Philip Brownell

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**  

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P U B L I S H I N G

Continuity and Change: Gestalt Therapy Now,  
Edited by Dan Bloom and Philip Brownell

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This book is dedicated to Richard Kitzler (1927-2009), an original member of the Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy, an International Community. He was a founding member and Fellow of the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy—and master psychotherapist and teacher.

Richard's contribution to the development of gestalt therapy is alive in those he touched, who pass on his legacy.



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# PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## Dan Bloom

This project presented itself at a moment of transitions in my professional life. I had just ended three years as editor-in-chief of an international gestalt therapy journal, *Studies in Gestalt Therapy: Dialogical Bridges*. The conference that is the subject of this book marked the end of my two-year presidency of the Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy, an International Community (AAGT)<sup>1</sup>.

When Phil Brownell approached me with this book proposal, I saw it as a way through these transitions to continue both work as editor/writer and my commitment to AAGT. And so it has been.

In compiling this book I relived some of the conference experience, but much more significantly, in editing the chapters that describe AAGT in detail and the foundational principles that drive the conferences and the AAGT community, I found myself in touch with the reasons I chose to be its president and why I am still fulfilled as a member. AAGT completes my identity as a gestalt therapist by offering me an association held together with a fabric woven of the threads of gestalt therapy principles. The weaving of these threads is a continuing process since the developing of gestalt therapy continues without end. This book offers a glimpse at a sliver of the AAGT experience. Editing it is my thank you to AAGT.

Obviously, then, I thank Phil for having conceived of this project. Had Christine Stevens not shown interest in joining this project as co-editor at its very beginning, I surely wouldn't have taken the plunge by myself. Unfortunately, other commitments required Christine reluctantly to withdraw from this project. Phil Brownell took her place and has been a tireless collaborator.

I thank the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy, my "home" institute that sustains me as a gestalt therapist. I carry its values with me wherever I go.

Most of all I thank my life-partner, Ora McCreary, who always stands with me. I mean this metaphorically and romantically. But I also mean this

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<sup>1</sup> For consistency, the organization is referred to as AAGT throughout the book.

literally. He has been the associate editor of this book and his careful attention to detail cannot be appreciated enough.

### **Phil Brownell**

I had come out of the experience of working with the folks at Cambridge Scholars Publishing (CSP) on the *Handbook for Theory, Research, and Practice in Gestalt Therapy*, and I saw an opportunity to work further with them by creating a series of scholarly books about contemporary gestalt therapy. They were open to that. The goal was to place in academic libraries and online electronic databases this same series. The series is titled “The World of Contemporary Gestalt Therapy,” and this book, *Continuity and Change: Gestalt Therapy Now*, is the second volume in that series (following the Handbook). It arose out of the realization that CSP publishes conference proceedings for professional organizations.

The idea of publishing a book on the tenth biennial conference of the AAGT seemed like a natural place to start the series. The AAGT had been developing into a fully operational international organization since its inception, and its conferences provided gestalt therapists the chance to associate, develop their work, and do what the name of the organization implied—advance gestalt therapy through the associating of its members.

I asked Dan Bloom and Christine Stevens if they would be interested in editing this first volume and they both accepted. We all knew, going into the 2010 conference that this book would result from it, but we had no idea how it would actually turn out. It's been gratifying to see so much about the nature of the AAGT included with some extremely solid pieces of thinking about our professional work. I feel pleased with the way this series has begun.

Of course there are the people to thank at CSP who get the book ready for press and then market it. Thanks to Carol and Amanda! I'd also like to thank Dan and Christine for taking on this project. I particularly appreciate the AAGT's willingness to open itself up for this kind of scrutiny.

Most of all, I'd like to thank my wife, Linda. Every time I go into crunch mode trying to meet writing or editing deadlines, she pays for it by being alone. And every time I wander out from behind the computer and try to get a break, she sends me back. “Finish it so we can be together!”

—Southampton, Bermuda, June, 2011

## **PART I:**

### **THE GROUND OF THE 2010 CONFERENCE**

# INTRODUCTION

## CONTINUITY AND CHANGE: GESTALT THERAPY NOW

### DAN BLOOM

Gestalt therapy is more or less sixty-years old. How we understand and practice it today is much different from how it was practiced when introduced by our founders to a post-war world dominated by the classical psychoanalytic paradigm. Gestalt therapy began in New York City and soon spread across the United States to become one of the principal engines of humanistic psychotherapy. Gestalt therapy is justly known for its influence on the “human potential” movement of the mid- and late Twentieth Century. In its sixty-year development, it has grown far beyond that reputation. In short order, gestalt therapy became international and is practiced worldwide.

Gestalt therapy is an approach to psychotherapy, a psychological theory, a socio-political theory, a framework for organizational development, and a basis for community organizing. This book is a record of the AAGT’s 2010 biennial conference and documents the international diversity of gestalt therapy. It shows that although gestalt therapy itself is held together by core concepts, it welcomes differences. The conference as reflected in this book also reflects the communities and cultures in which gestalt therapy is practiced—as it must, since one of gestalt therapy’s core principles is creative-adjustment to the field, the situation, or in ordinary language, the circumstances of everyday living.

This principle, creative-adjustment, also assures us gestalt therapists that our modality will always be poised between continuity and change—this conference’s theme. In the terms of our theory, we are always in a process of creative change as we creatively-adjust to new situations—that is, to opportunities and constraints of the situations.

When AAGT convenes its biennial conference, it is not only an opportunity for presenters to discuss each others’ work, but to “be” gestalt therapy together, since, as gestalt therapists, no matter which of its fields

of practice we identify with, be we psychotherapists or organizational consultants and so on, we do our best *to be* the practice that we preach. An AAGT conference is the lived-experience of gestalt therapy. It is an experiment in the process of creative-adjusting. A book such as this cannot capture this process anymore than a still photo of a bird in flight can catch the bird's movement.

It took a community to hold an AAGT conference. As this book reflects, AAGT is a community process unfolding through time, drawing from its beginnings, sustained by its founding principles, and renewed by the commitment of its members to the lived-experience of gestalt therapy principles. Gestalt therapy is alive in the conference planning, convening, and conference experience itself.

The book you hold in your hands is a record of the AAGT's 10<sup>th</sup> biennial conference, "Continuity and Change: Gestalt Therapy Now," which was held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States of America, June, 2010. Like the conference itself, the book contains the different voices, interests, and talents of our membership.

These chapters express different perspectives, ideas, and feelings, reflecting the different spokespersons and narrators in the conference itself. There are first person accounts and scientific papers based on conference presentations. Some chapters are the texts of conference speeches and others narratives of conference workshops. The first two chapters describe the organization itself: its history and its foundation in gestalt therapy principles. Chapters Three and Four describe how this particular conference was conceived of, planned, and actually carried out. The remainder of the chapters express the content of the conference itself. Chapter Twenty-Eight is my reflections on the conference and its worlded context.

You will find questioning of gestalt therapy concepts alongside practical applications of traditional gestalt therapy methods. Philosophy, neuroscience, spirituality, psychology, social theory—an AAGT conference covers the world of contemporary psychotherapy.

The chapters of this book were selected based on their quality and on how they also represented the conference. Given constraints on this book's length, it was not possible to print all the worthy contributions. Those published here illustrate the international character of the conference and its diversity in levels of professional expertise. We include the complete conference program with abstracts of all the presentations as one of the appendices.

We hope this book is an opening for the reader into contemporary gestalt therapy and into the lived-experience of an important gestalt therapy association, AAGT.

# CHAPTER ONE

## PERSPECTIVE AND HISTORY

CHARLES BOWMAN<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This chapter identifies the value of exploring the history of the AAGT in terms of the model of governance, the structural and the process components of the organization. The organization's birth and growth are discussed. Areas of influence and development for gestalt therapy in general and for the organization in particular are highlighted, as are interesting historical events, procedures and processes.

### **AAGT: Perspective and History**

It is inevitable that witnessing history from one's own perspective leads to multiple accounts. Emerson noted this in 1841 (Emerson, 1841/2009):

We are always coming up with the emphatic facts of history in our private experience and verifying them here. All history becomes subjective. In other words, there is properly no history, only biography. Every mind must know the whole lesson for itself, must go over the whole ground (Emerson, 1841/2009).

The goal of this chapter is to present a reasonable construction of the AAGT from the only perspective one can have—our present position in an ever changing field.

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to acknowledge the following contributors to this historical account for their recollection, archival material and/or their editorial acumen: Jack Neggerman, Bud Feder, Ansel Woldt, Peter Philippon, Dan Bloom and Phil Brownell.

This is no small task. Prominent and dramatic examples of the impact of field dynamics include the change in historical accounting of the European settlement of America or the nature and extent of the Holocaust. In the first instance we can see that a changing *weltanschauung* has resulted in cultures contacting and assimilating differences to bring about an enlightened understanding of Native American history in America. In the second instance, one's position in the field has a major impact upon understanding the "facts" of history, for instance, whether one is learning of the Holocaust in Iran or in Poland. We are, indeed, of the field, and the field truly determines our experience of history.

### **Why a History of AAGT?**

AAGT members will differ as to what constitutes historical truth, particularly when it comes to establishing who was responsible for what, where and when. This is the proverbial narcissism of small differences compared to the more significant value of recounting the many innovative and experimental structural and process components adopted by AAGT over the last 20 years. Without a doubt, this organizational work warrants proclamation.

While those "historical truths" that involve people and places are recounted here for the sake of those involved in the ongoing experiment that is AAGT, the real mark AAGT makes in the world lies in the novel and pioneering work in the areas of community development, consensual governance, and balancing organizational and personal growth. AAGT has also focused on content, too—gestalt therapy theory and practice. In 20 years the organization has provided professional growth and development for thousands of interested participants through 11 international conferences and many more regional and national gatherings.

Interspersed throughout this historical narrative is the fruit of a 20 year birth: the *AAGT Constitution and By-Laws* as a model of consensual governance; the use of sub-groups such as interest, process and community groups to accomplish the work of the whole; and, the management of expansion from local to international stature using a broad spectrum of technologies. Last but certainly not least, a dedication to here-and-now process has led the organization from its inception. Whether through excruciatingly detailed and time consuming community meetings or by utilizing "Watchdog and Braking" subgroups, "Experiments in Community Building" meetings during conferences, or entire conference themes dedicated to this moment's trials and tribulations, focus upon our being together in community in meaningful dialogue has not wavered, nor will it.

## Beginnings

AAGT did not spring from the ethers. Prior to AAGT there were gestalt training centers worldwide, many including goals of associating or advancing gestalt therapy. The Association for Humanistic Psychology (AHP) and the American Academy of Psychotherapists (AAP) also played prevalent roles in the direction of gestalt therapy prior to AAGT. In 1992, Ed Smith (an AAP and AAGT member) published 57 gestalt articles that appeared in the AAP journal, *Voices*, from 1967 through 1989 (Smith, 1992).

In 1975, John Stevens organized a meeting of people interested in gestalt therapy to promote his new book, *Gestalt Is*. The meeting piggybacked with an AHP conference held in Estes Park, Colorado. Several AAGT members were present, including Jack Neggerman, Ansel Woldt and Stella Resnick and I. Joe Wysong was also present and compiled and published the first *Gestalt Directory* in 1975.<sup>2</sup> He would later found The Center for Gestalt Development and publish the first edition of the *Gestalt Journal* in 1978. The *Gestalt Journal* began hosting conferences as an annual event thereafter, and a gestalt therapy community began to coalesce. Increasingly during the next decade there was a yearning for additional community and opportunities to associate with other gestalt therapy practitioners. “The Gestalt Journal conferences provided the relational foundation necessary for conception, labor and birthing in the formation of AAGT” (Feder & Woldt, 2009, p. 133).

At the 10<sup>th</sup> Gestalt Journal Conference in Montreal, time was allocated for a “Town Hall” meeting, where therapeutic concerns were set aside in favor of political dialogue. During this Town Hall meeting the first formal discussions of forming an organization occurred. The attendees, around 200, agreed that a slow, deliberate germination period was desirable (Feder & Woldt, 2009). Although thoughts of forming an organization had been fomenting for years, during the next several years interested gestalt therapists would move from thought to action, laying AAGT’s foundation. Early consideration was given to forming a United States organization exclusively (to be called the “National Association of Gestalt Therapists”). There was also discussion of remaining an offshoot of the Gestalt Journal Conferences and continuing to develop the town hall meeting structure. Neither would prove to be the case.

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<sup>2</sup> The first directory of gestalt therapists was compiled by Robert Resnick in 1969 but was not widely distributed (Resnick, personal communication, July, 2006). It is available online at <http://www.gestalt.us/hammond/GD1969.pdf>

In 1990, 40 people met for a daylong pre-conference meeting at the Gestalt Journal conference in Boston. The goal was to further the work of developing an association. A steering committee of 12 was established and Jack Neggerman was asked to chair the committee. A pivotal development, in addition to identifying a temporary leadership structure, included clearly stating that the major emphasis of this fledgling organization would be placing gestalt therapy values squarely at the center of the organization's structure. Another significant event was "passing the hat" in true grass-roots fashion to collect the first-ever dues paid to the organization.

Jack Neggerman, steering committee chair and treasurer at that time, offered his recollection of this early formative process:

It was discussed that as form emerges, it would hopefully come out of response to community needs and remain flexible and organismic. Some stressed our commitment to individuality and the necessity to attend to individuality needs as well as the needs of the larger community. The risk to the individual as a result of organizing was emphasized. There will be a dialectical and paradoxical nature to this process, and hopefully, form will continue to emerge out of community need without the organization rigidifying. Many thought we should keep the developmental process slow and gradually allow structure to emerge. Others felt that the organization would never develop, as has been the history, if the process is too slow. We clarified that we have many separate interests. We have thought of ourselves possibly as a confederation of Interest Groups," as opposed to a monolithic organization. Before the 1990 conference was over, we defined 9 separate interest groups. By consensus, these groups were charged with brainstorming and considering possibilities, remaining loosely structured, defining their purpose, developing a way to communicate, but to not take action yet. (J. Neggerman, personal communication, May 1, 2011)

The 13<sup>th</sup> Gestalt Journal Conference heralded the official formation of the organization, the official founding of AAGT being April 10, 1991. The first page of the original, hand-written charter by Association Archivist Ansel Woldt is reproduced in Figure 1-2. Woldt (2010) offered the following commentary on this founding experience:

This daylong meeting was about 8 hours long, all of which was videotaped for posterity. ...Before breaking for lunch, the 24-member Steering Committee agreed to and signed a handwritten document ...which stated the following:

"Toward the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy and the Associating of Gestalt Therapists. Whereas, it is difficult to support the process of professional associating without a known public forum, which has both form and functions delineated, that keeps the process fluid and the

organizational structure as ground; It is hereby Moved that we declare ourselves as an organization to provide the “Ground” for the preservation and advancement of Gestalt Therapy, and that this organization be known as The Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy.” (np)

Sixty founding members signed the attendance roster, and later review of the videotape of the proceedings revealed a number of others who entered the meeting throughout the day. The full list of AAGT Founders is also available in Table 1-1.

The following day about 100 participants attended the first Annual General Meeting (AGM) of AAGT. At the second AGM, April 2, 1992, in Boston, the initial *AAGT Constitution and By-Laws* were approved and later that year a Certificate of Incorporation was filed in the State of Delaware. The incorporating officers were Maya Schrage Brand, AAGT Charter President; Jack Neggerman, AAGT Charter Treasurer; and Ansel Woldt, AAGT Charter Secretary. These officers served as AAGT’s first Board of Directors.

The first interest groups to evolve from member associating were coordinated by Felicia Carroll and are identified in Table 1-2. Two of the Interest Groups were crucial in guiding the Association’s functioning and ongoing structural development. The “Philosophy, Purpose and Structure Interest Group” was active in taking the content that developed in the community and considering it through a lens of gestalt therapy theory, keeping gestalt therapy values figural in the organization.

The “Watchdog and Braking Committee” also played a central role. This committee “was envisioned as standing outside of the Association as a formal component to prevent the development of a bureaucratic monstrosity that might hurt Gestalt Therapy or its’ practitioners” (J. Neggerman, personal communication, May 1, 2011).

Concerns had been voiced about bureaucracy, exclusivity, and harm to individuals and most participants were open to listening and seriously considering the input from the “Watchdog and Braking Committee.” The most noticeable voice of this committee was Richard Kitzler’s. In a 1991 essay he eloquently expressed the integration of AAGT process and gestalt therapy theory:

False conflicts of objects in the foreground careen and collide; premature pacifications emerge in solutions from *Robert’s Rules of Order*. A failure of aggression, of pressing on to the next resistance, a fundament of gestalt therapy is the pacifier. A therapy that envisions the whole person, as gestalt therapy, is obliged to find the support possible to bring us into closer and closer contact. We have tried to do this in our groups/structure interaction

in AAGT as a democratic model. We will investigate in our dialogue how we have failed. (p. 147)

Today Interest Groups are a welcome but minor part of the AAGT experience; all but a few are inactive, although 19 Interest groups are listed on the AAGT website<sup>3</sup>. The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Interest Group has a long history of activism and has met regularly at all conferences. The International Next Generation Interest Group (INGIG) was formed by new AAGT members during the 2008 Conference in Manchester, England, as a conduit for bringing new life and enthusiasm into the organization.

## **Associating and Advancing at AAGT**

Significant tensions have always existed, and been encouraged, in the AAGT Community. At AAGT's second town hall meeting the Charter Secretary recorded the following statements, indicative of a tension that has been held in AAGT since these early beginnings (Feder & Woldt, 2009):

Richard Kitzler: Power rests with the people.

Zelda Friedman: The Gestalt philosophy of inclusion demands here-and-now participation with awareness of our contacting process.

Carl Hodges: To be consistent with Gestalt therapy tenets, our decisions should be made by seeking consensus.

Violet Oaklander: We need to be an inclusionary body, not an exclusionary body.

Candace Knight: Inclusion and consensus-seeking go hand-in-hand; they both require listening to and confirmation of those dissenting and abstaining if they wish to voice their positions.

Judith Brown: Participation in Gestalt groups involves making the implicit explicit with awareness of its effects on the group process.

Miriam Polster: Structure is essential to have the boundaries necessary for contact.

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<sup>3</sup> Any AAGT member can form an Interest Group by soliciting two or more interested members and contacting the Interest Groups Coordinator.

Sylvia Crocker: We need to know the difference between making and imposing decisions.

Erving Polster: We are presently operating in this meeting with a quasi-hierarchical structure and such structures are essential for an organization to function.

Gary Yontef: We need to trust the organism's self-regulatory process.

Philip Lichtenberg: Everybody cannot be involved in every organizational decision so we need an executive function and advisory board to make AAGT workable. (p. 137)

This tension is captured in the very title of the organization through the words “associating” and “advancing.” Is structure a necessary component for advancing or a hindrance to associating? Can hierarchy serve the masses equally so that advancing grows organically from associating instead of being organizationally driven? The answers remain elusive. From the comments above, Neggerman identified “the most popular response from those making suggestions to this committee was that an association should create the ground, not the figure” (J. Neggerman, personal communication, May 1, 2011). That response is as true for AAGT today as it was 20 years ago.

Pouring through statements about process and consensus development may seem tedious but it offers a flavor of the boredom, anxiety, excitement, and moments of contact experienced in the eight hour meeting that generated these comments and even more questions of form, structure, governance, inclusion, delegation and responsibility. This focused attention to both process and content yielded solid results. First and foremost, a form of consensual governance emerged, steeped in gestalt therapy principles (inclusion, contact and withdraw, making the implicit explicit). Second, a majority vote followed that also included listening to and confirming those dissenting and abstaining—a fledgling model of the hybrid democratic consensus that AAGT continues to develop.

These were the first organizational decisions of the new governing process and structure: the evolving method of consensual leadership would prevail; the criterion for membership was the member's interest and dues payment; the thrust to go international was tabled; and, Maya Brand was elected AAGT's first president. The working draft of a Constitution and

By- Laws was approved (Figure 1-1 is a copy of the original, hand-written document)<sup>4</sup>.

## **Governance and the Covenant of Community**

The Presidents of AAGT hold the tension of the individual and the interplay between the individual and the community. “The President occupies the bully pulpit from which she or he can grab hold of a vision of the organization and hopefully encourage it” (Bloom, 2009, p. 2). Gestalt therapy practitioners have long understood that all behavior is social. Thus, the paradox of upholding individual needs within a bureaucracy and developing the organization-as-a-whole is the work of AAGT members in general and the leadership of the organization, specifically. The role of President carries with it some latitude, but generally the President works to avoid the polarization of the individual versus the community and practices a field perspective.

The AAGT Presidency is the most demanding position within AAGT. The term is two years, with a one-year term as President-Elect and another as Past President. The four-year commitment facilitates the continuity of the leadership team. The list of elected AAGT Presidents is below, including Jack Neggerman, the first Steering Committee Chair. Each President convenes a leadership team consisting of a President Elect, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer, Archivist, Communications Director, Organizational and Regional Representatives, and other positions created during AGMs to meet the evolving needs of the organization.

<b>President</b>	<b>Inaugural Year</b>
Jack Neggerman	1990
Maya Brand	1992
Carl Hodges	1994
Charlie Bowman	1996
Bruce Robertson	1998
Carol Brockman	2000
Bud Feder	2002
Brian O’Neill	2004
Peter Philipppson	2006
Dan Bloom	2008
Cathy Gray	2010
Gail Feinstein	2012

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<sup>4</sup> The full AAGT Constitution and By-Laws, an evolving and living document, can be found at <http://www.aagt.org/main.cfm?p=about&c=constitutionandbylaws>.

There is an irony in the presidential position in that an organization that prides itself in egalitarian membership and shared governance so actively focuses on a single position and willingly offers authority to the office to conduct its affairs. The presidency is a forum for contact as members wrestle with difficult issues of importance to the community.<sup>5</sup>

While the presidency is one means of maintaining the forum and the living constitution another, there are others. Following the New York conference in 1999, the community was in crisis, struggling with issues of professionalism in conferencing versus intimacy in associating, questions about the allocation of organizational resources were allocated, and many long-standing grievances between individuals. Many members voiced concern that the community meeting process had become abusive. The next two conferences were devoted to structures that would afford open space and time for the community to creatively adjust to this situation. The first Florida conference (2002) specifically addressed the community issues via the conference theme, “Holding the Heat: Conflict, Creativity, Contact.”

Prior to the 2002 conference, AAGT President Carol Brockman introduced the “Covenant of Community” via the *Newsletter* (Brockman, 2001). The Covenant of Community would later be voted into the AAGT Constitution and By-Laws. She introduced it thusly:

One of the highlights of the Dallas conference was the creation of a Covenant of Community, to be further developed over the years. It was designed in order to respond to the unnecessary pain we have cost each other as we have struggled to simultaneously make room for ourselves and create a community. Here is what was arrived at in Dallas:

#### *The Covenant of Community*

Proposals for the description and values of the covenant of community:

1. We as members of AAGT undertake and encourage one another to undertake engagement in ongoing dialogue with one another and to remain open and in contact when choosing to withdraw temporarily from dialogue.
2. We undertake to own our own projections and to check out our assumptions, and to encourage one another to do so.

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<sup>5</sup> Over the life of AAGT, some of the most difficult issues have included the aforementioned debates over styles of gestalt therapy practice, birthing the organization from the Gestalt Journal, managing the degrees of expertise and influence of members in an organization with no clear pecking order and generally resolving the tensions that emerge in heated, open community meetings.

3. We undertake to maintain our community through patience and understanding.
4. We undertake to support the needs of the international members of our community.
5. We undertake to stay with even difficult dialogue, acknowledging the need for space and refreshment when hungry, tired, frustrated, but not abandoning one another.
6. We undertake to get and remain interested in the impact our behavior, words, and intentions have on one another.
7. We undertake to put our desire for and interest in power (in whatever form) out on the table, along with being honest and direct in other arenas.
8. We undertake to attend carefully to language or other communication that “objectifies the other.” (p. 1)

These, then, are the tools that have developed within the AAGT community over time as part of the means of allowing structure to emerge as a function of contacting—organizational position and responsibility, community integration into all aspects of meeting, a malleable constitution, and conference planning centered around emergent themes in the community.

## **Communicating and Conferencing: Creative Processes in AAGT**

AAGT’s ambitious, if not at times bifurcated, mission of associating and advancing gestalt therapy is sustainable only through contacting and communicating. In the early 1990s ongoing, spontaneous, long-distance communicating was not as simple as it is today and few AAGT members were available for contact via the internet. Digital voice and video conferencing are now the preferred means for Board, Region and Conference Planning communication. The 2012 AAGT Conference Planning Committee is utilizing, almost exclusively, digital online voice and data communication, shared peer-to-peer document collaborating, and social networking.

In 1995, AAGT launched an ambitious campaign to subscribe members to an “Internet Mailbox.” The Spring, 1995 *AAGT Newsletter* offered relatively complicated instructions for subscribing to [aagt@indy.net](mailto:aagt@indy.net) and coaxed subscriptions by identifying members who were communicating online “from as far away as Australia and Capetown, South Africa”

(O'Hara, 1995). Brian O'Hara, later an AAGT Treasurer, accepted a newly created position of "Internet Coordinator" and offered face to face instruction in connectivity.

A year later the AAGT Newsletter would print a *Renga* (a genre of Japanese collaborative poetry) created on that mail list by the collaboration of many members around the world, demonstrating the growth of the medium, improved ease of internet access, and AAGT member's spontaneous, creative integration of this new expressive forum. Although this type of collaboration is accepted and commonplace today, it was emerging communication in 1995 and highly novel to AAGT. The *Renga* is reprinted in its entirety in Table 1-3.

A reasonable means of communicating meant the stage was set for AAGT's becoming a global vehicle for advancing gestalt therapy and providing a forum for associating. As the relationship between AAGT and *The Gestalt Journal* waned, the consensus of the membership was to create a conference that would uphold the values identified in the constitution. This meant a peer-reviewed conference where all members were invited to submit proposals, participate in conference planning and have their works or works-in-progress considered objectively, regardless of status or previous works, unlike the structure of the previous Gestalt Journal Conferences.

AAGT conferences offer unique experiences in aspects of conference planning, theme development, process group participation and community building. Of utmost significance are the process group model and the integrated experience of the AAGT community throughout the conference. Kitzler (2009) outlines the general principles of the conference:

The conference is so far, designed as a loop which will flow on its ribbon presentations, invitationals, demonstrations, papers; groups so far perhaps thought of as process groups, whose function is to relate the conference to and within itself... This brings us to the ticking time bomb in the conference, the [process] groups. It is here that the real work of integrating the experience of the conference begins, that is to provide the base then for its wind-up as a coherent whole... (p. 161)

The AAGT AGM is the starting point for AAGT governance and conference planning. The AGM is not separate from the conference proper and is integrated into the conference-as-a-whole. Conference themes are selected based upon the here-and-now experiences of the community and typically expressed in the community meetings. Since conference themes emerge in and from the community, they offer a glimpse into the flow of AAGT over time. Notice the progression of conference themes over time:

Theme	Date	Location
Bringing us Together	1995	New Orleans
Different Meanings, Common Ground	1997	San Francisco
Gestalt in the World and the World of Gestalt	1998	Cleveland
Expanding our Vision: Bridging our Diversity	1999	New York
Social Vision and Personal Growth	2000	Dallas
Holding the Heat: Conflict, Creativity, Contact	2002	St. Pete Beach, FL
Re-Creation: Transforming the Field	2004	St. Pete Beach, FL
Dreaming the Future: Expanding our Consciousness	2006	Vancouver
Borders and Bridges: Differentiation in Contact	2008	Manchester, UK
Continuity and Change: Gestalt Therapy Now	2010	Philadelphia
Cultures, Contact, Change	2012	Puebla, Mexico

“Bringing Us Together” is obviously a theme reflecting the earliest stages of group development, while “Holding the Heat” reflects an advanced stage of development and emerging conflict. Later conference titles include the words “Re-creation,” “Dreaming,” “Bridges,” and “Continuity,” reflective of the process needs of the AAGT community moving through time. These needs have traversed issues of “East Coast–West Coast” styles of gestalt therapy, conflicts with the *Gestalt Journal*, internal governance issues, values conflicts with non-gestalt therapists, and the latest, intense focus on the organization’s “performing” across cultures. Conference themes are precisely one of the structures that emerge in an “organic” fashion, according to the needs of the community.

## **AAGT, an International Community**

At the San Francisco conference in 1997, 300 people attended from 24 countries across five continents (Bowman, 1998). AAGT had great potential as an international organization but there was, and remains, much work to do in terms of grappling with the diversity of gestalt therapy practice, culture, gender, age, and nationality. It is tempting to categorize this work as “learning to appreciate difference,” but the cliché does little justice to the enormity of the task.

Many conference themes have focused on appreciating difference, particularly the themes “...Differentiation in Contact” and the abovementioned “Holding the Heat...” Plenary sessions during these conferences, community meetings during every conference, and the ongoing discussions that occur between face-to-face meetings on e-mail, formal Board or committee meetings, and at regional gatherings, advance this important work.

An international community has been an AAGT goal since the earliest meetings, captured by AAGT’s fourth president, Bruce Robertson, as he voiced the organizations “attempt to hold on to a balance of open, inclusive dialogue over great distances within the press of timely deadlines” (Robertson, 1998, p. 1).

In 2005, the AGM was held in Amsterdam with Brian O’Neill, an Australian, as President. In addition to championing the meeting in Amsterdam, he also announced a reinvigorated AAGT Member’s List, “with the purpose of serving AAGT members and providing an ongoing forum for the ‘Associating’ and ‘Advancing’ that has been and continues to be so much a part of our formation since we began” (O’Neill, 2005, p. 2). The AAGT Members List is active today and list archives are currently available to all members.

The Amsterdam AGM heard a proposal to change the name of the organization to “The International Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy.” The proposal was met with mixed responses by the membership, although consensus was reached among those in attendance in Amsterdam. After much discussion following the AGM, the name change proposition was tabled, in order to be reconsidered at the next biennial conference in Vancouver in 2006. Decisions of that magnitude are made during the AGMs that occur during biennial conference years to maximize potential community attendance<sup>6</sup>. In Vancouver, the first AAGT

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<sup>6</sup> The volunteer structure of AAGT could not maintain the commitment necessary to produce a large conference every year and early attempts to do so failed. Since

conference held outside the USA, the decision was revisited, and a consensus was reached to append the phrase “an international community” to the name. The AAGT thus became the “Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy, an International Community.”

This work continues. During his presidency, Peter Philippson championed the first conference outside North America, held in Manchester, UK. According to Philippson there is a “sense of a growing vision of what it means to be ‘an International Community’ [but] I still don’t think the international nature is taken seriously” (Philippson, 2011, personal communication). The 2012 conference, “Cultures, Contact, Change,” will be held in Puebla, Mexico. This conference will be the first AAGT conference to experiment with bi-lingual presentations.

Vice-President Dan Bloom spearheaded a decision-making task force organized in 2007 to recommend revisions to by-laws affecting notice to members concerning matters on the AGM agenda, which revisions were subsequently adopted. As president, Bloom championed the significance of the AAGT regions and encouraged their activities. He proposed a Regional Development Fund to assist the regions. “So now wherever AAGT may decide to hold our biennial conference, we will have local, regional events for our members to attend. We can be both an international AND a regional organization” (Bloom, 2011, personal communication).

At the 2011 Annual General Meeting in New York City, consensus was reached and a Regional Development Fund was established. The fund provides “seed” monies, grants and loans for Regional activities and a means of disbursement and accountability. As with all AAGT structures, transparency to the membership is paramount.

## **Then, Now, Next: Publication, Research and Beyond**

AAGT is forever inventing itself. Two emerging areas of interest in the AAGT community are publication and research. The seeds of these interests have been present from the beginning in the Outreach and Academic Interest Groups. This confirms further the principle of “organic” growth as these interests grew from the membership, were incubated in the community and found support in consensus.

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AAGT’s status as a legal entity requires an annual meeting, the off-conference years tend to be attended by fewer members, prompting the organization to reconsider the meaning of consensus-seeking among attendees of the smaller gathering.