

# Reorganisation in a traumatised relational field: the well-grounded therapist

Miriam Taylor and Vienna Duff

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**Abstract:** Being in the natural world is widely understood as having a beneficial effect, and experience of place resonates deeply (Jordan and Hinds, 2016). This effect and the potential of nature as an integral element of therapists' self-care warrant attention and exploration through a Gestalt lens. The authors' curiosity about this relationship and its application to trauma work led them to experiment with direct and creative contact with the natural world. Here, we set out to do three things: to provide a theoretical context and rationale; to articulate the ways in which Gestalt thinking informs our approach; and to illustrate the transformative potential of this area of work. We make links between the literature and practices of ecopsychology/psychotherapy and Gestalt theory, principles and practice. We incorporate storytelling and conversation to illuminate embodied enquiry, intentionally situating the presence of our 'selves' as participant observers and co-authors. We draw reflexively on aspects of practice to illustrate the core thesis and the concept of 'the well-grounded therapist' noting that there are implications for therapists' practices of self-care. Whilst placing a clear emphasis on trauma work in this article, the central argument is about the ethics and value of self-care as a dialogic relationship inclusive of nature, therapist and client, and is applicable to a wide range of therapeutic work and settings.

**Keywords:** contact, dialogue, embodiment, ethic, field, natural world, self-care, regeneration, senses, trauma.

## Situating the work

Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.  
(Audre Lorde)

There are many textures and properties of the relational field in trauma work that are so embedded that they go underground. The cumulative effect of these may well be greater than the sum of its parts, an aggregate more perceptible by increasing fragmentation and absence. Our fundamental premise is the recognition of the profound sense of disconnection that accompanies complex trauma and other catastrophic disturbances of the self–other boundary. We primarily discuss relational trauma, in which the survival of the self without support is overwhelmed. Trauma of this nature annihilates a sense of context for the individual affected. Herman speaks of the existential crisis arising from the destruction of 'the victim's fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world, the positive value of the self and the meaningful order of creation ... that sustain life' (1992, pp. 51–2), while Stolorow

refers to a loss of the 'absolutisms of everyday life' (2007, p. 16). Through the therapeutic relationship these dimensions also impact the therapist. We suggest particular relevance for practitioners working with complex issues such as trauma, or in challenging environments (see Denham-Vaughan and Glenholmes, in press) and position this discussion as an important influence – among others – on the relational field.

A second premise is that we are all traumatised to a greater or lesser extent, and that low-level trauma buzzes around us constantly. We can 'understand our reality as a chronic state of emergency, as a Nervous System' (Taussig, 2004, p. 270). In addition to this, our own life-stories shape the relational therapeutic field. A whole field view includes our personal wounds and concerns (Adams, 2014). Trauma, being so hard to contain, spills out into organisations and into our lives and work, the constant interchange of trauma, like a hot potato being passed around.

That working with trauma will change us as therapists is a third premise. Perlman and Saakvitne remind us of the personal investment therapists make, involving

inevitable gains and losses (1995, p. 279). Implicit in the therapeutic contract is that we open ourselves to feel threatened, devalued, objectified, ignored and hated (Davis and Frawley, cited in Perlman and Saakvitne, 1995, p. 24). We meet clients who test us, reject us, drip feed us appalling stories, who try to possess us, to hold us captive to their suffering whilst also navigating a journey of recovery. It is not an overstatement that such a potent traumatised field puts us at psychological and physical risk.

Consistent with Gestalt principles of co-creation, Gartner coins the term 'countertrauma' in acknowledgement of our response (2017, p. 7). However, the countertrauma that resonates within us can be problematic to identify, partly because the therapist will also inevitably become caught in the process of dissociation (Taylor, 2014, p. 225; Bromberg, 2001; 2006; 2011). Paradoxically, a co-created *absence* gets in the way more often than we recognise.

The figures that are compelling in this area of work are those most resonant of trauma. They stir personal stories within us. Our fourth premise is, therefore, concerned with *how* trauma calls to the self of the therapist, or shuts him or her out. Our own enduring relational themes (Jacobs, 2017) are summoned in the therapeutic endeavour. Dissociation, by definition, is an absence rather than a presence (Taylor, 2014, p. 129), therefore what we might cut off from is clinically relevant. '[Much] of the survivor's reaction and experience will be both theoretically and experientially groundless' (Kepner, 1995, p. 94), and we suggest that the same is inevitably true for the therapist to a degree. Bringing energy to alternative figures, increasing the field of choice, becomes a major intervention and influence on the therapeutic field and raises questions about therapists' self-care.

Finally, we are mindful of how sensitive traumatised clients are to their therapist's capacity to bear with them, so often communicated on an implicit embodied level outside of awareness. As a defence, they have learnt to read others for clues as to their safety, and to moderate the levels of arousal of their caretakers. Kepner suggests that 'our own body process is an intrinsic part of the transaction with the client' (2003, p. 11), intersubjective arousal being a primary transaction. 'The inner state of the therapist strongly influences the response of the client' (Geller and Greenberg, 2012, p. 59).

These five premises underpin our overall argument that failure to attend to all aspects of the total field perpetuates splits and disconnection. We are mindful that whilst we primarily explore dialogic contact with the other-than-human through a lens of healing, we also acknowledge the polarity as the other-than-human world experiences trauma from human impacts (Rust, 2011; Boring and Sloan, 2013). We see the whole field as

a vitally important part of how we locate ourselves in working with survivors of relational trauma, because how we as therapists situate ourselves in relation to it will resonate with clients. I (MT) teach that *our clients pay us primarily to take care of ourselves*, to preserve our capacity to remain present to multiple aspects of the relational, historical and experiential field, within an expanded window of tolerance which is continually resourced and updated (Taylor, 2014, pp. 195–6). The commandment that Levinas (1985) sees in the face of the suffering other is also a reflection of our own face. The act of self-preservation through self-care becomes political in the service of the people. Therefore, there is an ethic in which therapists' and supervisors' responsibility for configuring the relational field becomes both necessary and paramount. The immersive workshops we have offered<sup>1</sup> provided insight into the effects of grounding contact with the natural world, experienced in the presence of others.

## Mapping new territory

The earth does not argue,  
Is not pathetic, has no arrangements,  
Does not scream, haste, persuade, threaten, promise,  
Makes no discriminations, has no  
conceivable failures,  
Clothes nothing, refuses nothing, shuts none out.  
(Walt Whitman)

Our proposition is that the existential experience of those moments in which the restorative and regenerative qualities of the natural world become available to us is essential. This occurs through embodied awareness of therapists' relationship with the natural world. Without exploitation, we wish to consider nature's propensity to support healing, not perceived as resource but as a dialogic relationship. This is not to dismiss other properties of the whole other-than-human field, but to focus our thoughts through this particular lens. We recognise the total field as encompassing 'the overall human habitat' and endorse that 'sensory and bodily engagement is richer for greater contact with and awareness of our relationship with all aspects of life on Earth' (Parlett, 2015, p. 135). Responses to, as well as from, nature are enhanced by fully embracing interdependence, mutual contact and dialogue, thus applying field theory and Buber's dialogic attitude (Buber, 1958/1923) to contact with the integrated natural and human environment. We endeavour to demonstrate these processes through our approach to writing and the style of this article.

We draw on a vast and complex interplay of influences for this work about self-care, both personal and theoretical, and attempt here to tease them out. Firstly, the work is situated within Gestalt therapy maps of the

unified field, phenomenology, presence, organismic self-regulation, co-creation, body process and dialogue. In Gestalt therapy, there is increasing attention being paid to the structure of the ground (e.g. Wheeler, 1991; Stawman, 2011; Taylor, 2014; Chidiac et al., 2017). We appreciate the dynamic relationship between figure and ground, aware that an ungrounded figure may take us in damaging directions (Taylor, 2014, pp. 44–45). The interaction between figure and ground is not linear or hierarchical, and reflects a quality of emergent process within the smooth flow of the cycle of experience. We find support also in awareness experiments where we are invited to notice that which had *not* first caught our attention (Stevens, 1971, p. 10). Our argument is that a Gestalt ‘understanding’ of mutual engagement with the natural world is best appreciated as a synthesis of embodied immersion and our emergent awareness of being in relationship with it.

A consideration when working with trauma is to know what we are looking for. Here we turn to contemporary trauma theory to help us comprehend the processes operating on the field. Many such processes are subtle symbolisations of procedural learning and creative adjustments. Therefore, much of our attunement in trauma work is to the embodied rather than the spoken; it is also fragmented and disorganised. A key learning is that recovery needs to take place in circumstances that are different from those in which the trauma took place, and that there are significant dangers of re-enactment of those relational conditions inherent in the therapy (Taylor, 2014).

The new field of ecotherapy is also of relevance to us, which in turn rests on other multilayered grounds. McGeeney (2016), Totton (2011), Rust (2011), and Marshall (2016), for example, journey from a body psychotherapy background into ecotherapy. Other writers voice a concern for conservation, activism, and traditional indigenous healers. Among these are Chalquist (e.g. 2010), Plotkin (2003), and Mackinnon (2012). Snyder (1990) and Abram (1997; 2010) represent a genre of nature writing that appeals to a new relationship and dialogue with the natural world, while others, such as Dillard (1974), Thoreau (1854/1973) and Macfarlane (e.g. 2007) are more evocative in their approach. All this stands on a rich engagement with the pastoral by poets and artists from the eighteenth century onwards, emerging into direct use of the land, sometimes involving the body as instrument, by contemporary artists such as Goldsworthy (2001), Long (2018), and Drury (1998). The natural world invites generative responses.

From this background, we wish to make more figural the contributions of a few individuals. We wholeheartedly echo the sentiments expressed in Will Adams’ fine paper on Gestalt ecopsychology (2015),

appreciating that healing can be bi-directional and mutual. However, whilst like Adams, our thinking is inspired by Levinas, for the purposes of this approach we hear the commandment of the Other coming from the consulting room first. In accepting Adams’ concept of dissociation between body and nature, our understanding of dissociation and healing, however, is applied specifically to the area of trauma work (see Taylor, 2014, pp. 129–131). Rachel and Stephen Kaplan made a major contribution to the study of environmental psychology in the 1980s, conducting a number of research projects into the interaction between the human and other-than-human (1989). They did not anticipate some of their findings, for example the prevalence of mystical experience in contact with the natural world, or the difficulty in expressing and quantifying results. Some of their conclusions are discussed below. Ana Mendieta was a Cuban performance artist whose work focussed on the dialogue between her own body in relation to the earth, often developing themes of presence/absence, belonging, and inherent cycles from a feminist perspective. Underpinning our experiential workshops specifically, has been the influence of Andrea Olsen, and her remarkable contribution *Body and Earth* (2002). This book is difficult to categorise because it offers a sophisticated integration of highly diverse concepts; the experience it brings captures the essence of our thinking and writing.

We are likely to have ways of grounding ourselves before we greet our clients, and may seek in turn to ground them. Finding ground is a fundamental first process, enabling us to engage. Quite simply, we meet the earth through our bodies. Following Merleau-Ponty (Todres, 2007), embodied experience must always be considered alongside being and knowing. Geller and Greenberg place this embodied concept as the ‘first major subcategory of presence’ (2012, p. 110), and consider spending time in nature as an element of preparing for deepening presence in *daily life* (ibid., p. 74). They define grounding as ‘being present in the moment, in the body, with a sense of inner integration and inner steadiness in self’ (ibid., p. 213). For us, grounding is the precursor to the practice of inclusion. Although we can think of ground in other terms, such as relational, conceptual, sexual or spiritual, for example (Anagnostopoulou, 2015, p. 686), grounding in our sense invariably refers primarily to the body and its relationship to gravity.

Grounding, gravity and bonding take us closer to the earth. Grounding relates to ‘our contact with the body, the earth, nature, other human beings, family, culture, country, God’ (ibid.). This association between grounding and contact suggests this as being of prime interest to Gestalt therapists. But as Belz-

Knöferl suggests, we need first to find and to sustain this ground for ourselves: 'Therapists who do not know both grounding dimensions [of somatic resonance and necessary distance] within themselves, and who do not know how to balance them in a specific situation, will have difficulties working successfully with this concept' (2015, p. 680). Grounding offers up a more flexible and present response to trauma. And yet, as Marcus points out, it is possible to be over-grounded as well as under-grounded (1980). This calls to mind the limbo and liminoid states referred to by Denham-Vaughan (2010). However, in all ways, in trauma work it is wise to consider what is needed and multiply it.

The bodily adjustments that accompany grounding may include a release of tension, a slowing of heart rate and of breathing, and greater perceptual acuity. There is a sense of greater safety and opening, while a sense of belonging and connection can also be expected. The process of grounding is therefore both physiological and psychological (Anagnostopoulou, 2015, p. 686). Boadella offers the opinion that we need also to find our sense of inner ground (1987, p. 94), bringing a different pairing of internal and external. By connecting to ground we integrate some of the dichotomies of human experience, and may experience a degree of interconnection with the other-than-human world. The immediacy of physiological grounding opens us to numerous other grounds of being.

We can also develop this notion of the mutually influencing field beyond the therapeutic relationship and into ever expanding fields. Numerous writers attest to the fact that human beings are but one part of a larger system, all parts having equal value (see Abram (1997; 2010); Snyder (1990); Chalquist (2010); Totton (2011); Plotkin (2003)). Olsen spells this out: the substances that create the human body are the essential materials of the planet: 'Cells are the structural building blocks of all living beings' (2002, p. 26); the composition of bone is similar to that of marble (*ibid.*, p. 95); and she compares soil to the skin of the Earth (*ibid.*, p. 105).

## Snow: after the storm

I had my existence. I was there in the place  
and the place in me.  
(Seamus Heaney)

Putting into words the relationship between humans and the natural world is difficult. On the first pass, I (MT) went straight into my head and got stuck. As Kaplan and Kaplan recognise, 'it is hard to justify the role nature plays in rational terms' (1989, p. 1).

*I needed to go back to the raw experiential data (Abram, 1997, p. 48). Putting my conceptual self in my back pocket, so to speak, a new question for the*

*land arose: 'How does the natural world want me to write about this?' Being the first day of a week off in early March, I get in the car and head north, about fifty miles to the east coast. Even being on the open road makes a difference. The sense of getting away from it all is one of four key aspects of restorative environments identified by Kaplan and Kaplan (1989, p. 176). They point out that where we are going to is as important as where we are escaping from. There is blue sky for the first time in a week, and a sense of freedom and openness. Slowing down behind a lorry, I put my daily life behind me for a while, and enjoy the drive. Right now it's not just about finding a way to write; I have an old trauma playing on my mind, which takes time to settle even as I get away.*

*And then comes the first glimpse of the sea. I arrive at a beach I have never visited before, but without reference to a map I know how to do this; there's nowhere else to go. I've been doing this all my life; perhaps I'm tapping into some ancestral wisdom? At any rate, this offers a degree of recognition and familiarity at the start of my exploration. I'm about to enter a dialogue, based on phenomenological enquiry, about how to meet and learn from 'other' – other-than-human. Crossing the dunes I notice a brief moment of being on a threshold (Denham-Vaughan, 2010), an anticipation before I drop down on to the beach. And then I pause, and scan the horizon, the lie of the land and the sea. I smell the breeze, cool and directional. I let it in on my breath, deeply, quietly, without anxiety about this contact. My lungs seem to double in volume with each breath; I notice the expansion between my shoulder blades. The second element Kaplan and Kaplan identify is that of extent (1989, p. 189). Here we appreciate the scanning and scope that the non-human world offers us, the imagination, and the mystery. This notion includes also perception, spatial awareness, an appreciation of the organisation of the features, and a sense of safety. 'To achieve the feeling of extent it is necessary to have interrelatedness of the immediately perceived elements, so that they constitute a portion of some larger whole. Thus there must be sufficient connectedness to make it possible to build a mental map' (*ibid.*). This sits comfortably with a Gestalt sensibility towards organisation of perception, contact and unified field.*

*My limbs adjust instantly to the texture of the firm sand, sinking just a little to each step, amplifying the contact, catching my attention. My heart rate slows in sync with my pace, natural, comfortable. I feel fluid in my legs even as they make clear firm contact in the sand. I call to mind Olsen's taxonomy*



of seven integrated and integrative fluid systems in the body and their associated movements (2002, pp. 172–4). What fluid sense is this, I wonder? Deliberate in a mindful, aware way, not ponderous, simply the beat, beat, beat of my heart, the flow of my blood, corresponding in turn to lymph, synovial and interstitial fluids (*ibid.*, p. 175). Olsen explains: 'Because fluids are the transportation system of the body, integrating various parts, most movements reflect a blend of fluid states, comparable to the interconnected rhythms of water in the world around us' (*ibid.*). I am aware of the different ways water and land meet in this place.

I relish the ease of being here, where I can take in more, feel more receptive. I feel roamy; not following any defined path I wander wherever my curiosity takes me in this vast expanse, and my mind roams too. I'm aware that my curiosity is guided by my limbs and senses, my animal self, rather than by conscious intent. The need to explore is a pervasive human need (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989, p. 51), perhaps based partly on an instinctive need to establish a sense of safety, but also more creatively in terms of the search for novelty and growth.

I let go of my personal trauma as I walk; out here it seems less important as I let the natural world do its work in me. I sit for a while and make some gestural marks in my sketchbook, my eye and hand following edges, shapes, textures, blending and smudging. Words only begin to form as I speak some 'notes' into my voice recorder, which later give shape to this piece. My senses, my perceptions become more acute as I wait, attune and listen to what comes without words. Sounds carry differently, there's much activity in the stillness around me. Here I notice the glint and textures of sunlight on water, the shapes and contours that the many channels of water cut across the beach, the sound of the waves, the offshore windfarm, tracks in the sand, the behaviour of gulls. I am equally caught by the 'big picture' and the small details; a macro and micro perspective that colours some of the best writing in the genre (see, for example, Dillard, 1974; or Olsen, 2002). This attentional range supports and reflects my endeavours in the therapy room, where I might be working with the precise detail of phenomenological experience while simultaneously holding multiple other perspectives: individual, relational, historical and collective.

And then the flow of my attention is arrested. There's been a trauma here. Just three days ago, the British Isles were in the grip of the worst blizzards for some years. There's still lots of snow on the roadsides and in the dunes, although the thaw has come quickly in the last twenty-four hours. The

blizzards would have made landfall hereabouts, barrelling across the North Sea from Eastern Europe, causing much mischief and loss of life. The human loss numbered about ten; at my feet on a stretch of shoreline lie many hundreds of other casualties: crabs, wrasse, sea urchins, sea-suns, starfish. From a unified field perspective (Parlett, 1991), taking into account our finely tuned ecosystem and a recognition of interdependence, this loss is significant. An animistic view might call them brother crab, sister starfish. I've never seen such a sight; it is terrible, grotesque, smelly. The boundary between sea and land has been breached and things are not in their rightful place. Dislocated. Out of context. I imagine a monster wave flinging these creatures on to land, a car crash of an event. I learn later that the sea temperature dropped by three degrees during the storms. Tolerance levels for these creatures were exceeded, comparable to relational trauma. Some commentators considered this to be an effect of climate change, the human imprint on the natural world gone to extremes. Termed 'trans-species psychology', we can understand the other-than-human world as capable of experiencing PTSD (Bradshaw, 2009, p. 158). Our relationship with this world is indeed complex.

I slow right down, heaving shocked and sorrowful breaths now. It is an emotional sickness that rises in me. Slightly dazed, I try to comprehend. This has something to do with me, my life and my work, though I don't at first know what it is. I can only feel this. I discover later that I share more than 50% of my DNA with starfish. I am transfixed for some time before I step away, back into the wider expanse, seeing the 100 yards or so of devastation at the tideline in relation to the vast and broad expanse of the shore. It is only as I find this distance that I notice the context and can begin to integrate the experience. I first realise that I have seen a glimpse of an underwater world not normally visible to me. I consider the gulls, and how they survived the storms, a bigger sense that life carries on, in awe of their resilience. Taking all this in, I sense a reorganisation between my physiological and psychological responses. Becoming both observer and active participant, the land moves in me and I in it. As parts of co-created, nested and interdependent fields, our relationship with the non-human world is always reciprocal (Totton, 2011, p. 159). I have come to listen and to let the land speak to me. As witness to this catastrophe of human origin, I don't know who is the therapist now.

The questions I have of the land and the sea and all that live thereon or therein become more

*insistent. How does life move through you? What has it cost you to survive? What do you draw on as resources? How do you navigate forces that you are part of and yet are bigger than you? I might ask the same questions of a therapy client, supervisee or indeed colleague.*

## Discussion

Several themes emerge from this experience. Firstly, the experience of fascination (Messer Diehl, 2009, p. 170) or soft fascination as Kaplan and Kaplan call it (1989, p. 169), refers to the quality of attention the natural world evokes in us. 'Soft fascination ... permits a more reflective mode' (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989, p. 191). They suggest that this may have something to do with cognitive clarity, a redirection of attention that corresponds to the window of tolerance (Siegel, 1999, p. 253; Taylor, 2014, p. 63). Although there are potentially competing figures for my soft fascination, there is time and space for enough of them to emerge, and I can regulate myself accordingly. 'There is less conflict between what one wants to do and what needs to be done and less that seems arbitrary or irrelevant' (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989, p. 139). The arising sense of simplicity and ability to make choices in the ordering of experience is important for a number of reasons. These involve taking a number of small and related steps.

A sense of well-being and improved self-esteem are almost universal consequences of spending time in agreeable and hospitable natural surroundings. 'Previously frozen self-constructs can start to thaw, and the possibility of transformation and greater authenticity naturally arises ... our journey into wilderness becomes a journey into the unconscious' (Kerr and Key, cited in Totton, 2011, p. 168). This describes an integrative process giving rise to a sense of wholeness. Such organismic self-regulation is considered by Totton as 'an expression of the situational gestalt' (2011, p. 83), intimately arising as co-creative. Totton cites Gibson who claims that any theory of perceiver and the perceived as two separate entities is dualistic, and that we can think more holistically of the field as 'co-perceiving' (ibid.). This is echoed also by Olsen (2002, p. 60), and expanded in Taylor (2014, p. 188).

Relationships with the other-than-human are sometimes described as involving a dialogue. Perhaps being in solitude we are able to listen and engage at this implicit level of communication, appreciating an 'inter-being dialogue [that] is the recognition of the other as the all' (Conn and Conn, 2009, p. 115). 'Otherness' becomes less threatening as we acknowledge that 'the phenomenal field contains many *other* bodies, other forms that move and gesture in a fashion similar to our own (Snyder, 1990, p. 37). A sense of reciprocity

is therefore possible, since the 'exterior landscape and its creatures are an inseparable part of the interior landscape, the landscape of the spirit and the heart' (Totton, 2011, p. 165). Snyder takes us a step further: 'The sum of a field's forces becomes what we call very loosely the "spirit of place". To know the spirit of a place is to realize that you are part of a part and that the whole is made of parts, each of which is whole' (1990, p. 41). This sense of being part of a greater whole can be healing in itself, bringing a new perspective on the place of suffering in an enduring cosmos. Closely aligned to these experiences is the sense of wonder and awe inspired by the natural world. Kaplan and Kaplan see interconnectedness as a spiritual dimension of the natural environment (1989, p. 196). In addition, 'the quest for tranquillity, peace, satisfactions and silence resonates with what in religious contexts might be considered serenity' (ibid., p. 146).

Putting all this together we can see that the experience of nature is deeply integrative and offers a profound opportunity to resolve some of the inherent splits and disconnections that are inherent in trauma processes. This seems to happen because of the organismic regulation that is first and quickly possible in the natural world – create the conditions for regulation to take place and then the body knows how to heal itself (Taylor, 2014, p. 31). This requires safe reclaiming of embodied process and a loosening of rigid gestalts, supporting spontaneity and choice in the here-and-now.

## Rain: conversation

When I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better, that this cruelty too shall end, that peace and tranquillity will return once more.  
(Anne Frank)

After the storms came spring; as an integral part of our collaborative work and writing we met and talked. We walked along a canal, sometimes in silence, sometimes stopping to explore a particular point or to be in contact with the landscape. The key themes are reflected in the conversation below.

As we set off, it was raining lightly.

**MT:** *I have been thinking about my experience on the beach and what has emerged for me is that one of the most important aspects about this work for therapists is hope.*

**VD:** *As I listen to you, I hear the birds ... the sound of birdsong connects everything as I also feel connected to the woods in Belarus.<sup>2</sup> My trip was a lived experience of witnessing the effects of historical destruction on nature and human*

beings. Trauma, re-connection, re-generation ... processes of dying and coming forth. The land was also wounded, steeped in human blood and a witness to mass murder yet it is also a place of healing and growth, not just horror. During the commemorative ceremony I could hear the birds singing just as we can hear these right now so, what you have just said today was happening there in nature ... is this what people do too, connect with hope and heal?

**MT:** As though healing in one part of the field is connected to regeneration in another?

**VD:** Hope! Yes, we each do (or don't do) even one small thing and it contributes to wider change processes... we are interconnected.

**MT:** I think without that kind of connection the relational ground has an absence of ethical care.

Our attention is then caught by a new figure, the colour and form of some fallen trees. We consider the trauma to the tree and the new tree which has regenerated. We make connections to other examples ... when a forest burns it will regenerate, the burning of stubble after the straw has been harvested, bushfires where the fire stimulates the release of seeds from certain plants. In an ecological system, trauma and regeneration are meshed.

MT then notices some pussy willow. We reflect on the relationships between buds and leaves and the growth of new branches as we trace growth up one stem in the hedgerow to the tip. We wonder at the way in which trees and other plants communicate. Widening our perspective from the Earth and what grows from it, we note the residue of flood water.

**MT:** What's this got to do with body? Water is ancient and its history is within our bodies. I love that! Fluids are vital to all life processes: the human body, plants, animals, trees and earth. It plays a central part in life and regeneration, connecting across millennia.

**VD:** By making what was ground figural, shifting in and out of focus as we look at this landscape, this conversation is sharpening my awareness of integrated relationships with nature and how 'respect' for difference is an ingredient in symbiosis within an ecosystem, co-creation in human relationships and in therapeutic work.

Our discussion turns to an ethic of care being a political and systemic responsibility. The rain has stopped, we pause and enjoy the moment.

**VD:** I see it all the time, that therapists' endeavours to take responsibility for staying well-nourished

are not supported by others. A therapist's well-being, their sustainability, often isn't figural until it becomes 'a problem', and then it is generally 'given' to the therapist to rectify. So, the 'I' must repeatedly regenerate the self. If I do this in isolation, as is often a professional or organisational imperative, a fragmented rather than unitary field is maintained.

I wonder if, for some, the need for continual personal and professional self-care is potentially shaming? Is becoming depleted shameful? In contrast, recognising and accepting our vulnerability within the work that we do, which I think is exactly what we are putting forward, is honouring of the self of both the therapist and the client. This seems a more vital approach and this process of regeneration, of death and destruction on small or larger scales, is what we have observed and connected with today. It is an integral part of the habitat of the natural world.

**MT:** I am just thinking about language ... Inhabiting myself, my body, the Earth; I in-habit, and therefore, I come to myself. So do I come into a different relationship with the physical world, which emerges freshly, when I in-habit my body? Environmentally and theoretically this provides a means through which the therapist/supervisor can experience their still point – be mindful and present.

**VD:** Do you mean finding a still point with support of, and in the gaze of the 'Other'? When the natural world becomes present and we become open to the relational artistry of this process?

**MT:** Yes, I do; the still point of fluid responsiveness that opens up organismic regulation.

So, whose conversation is this? – today this is us together, we are thinking about Gestalt theory, ecotherapy, and dialogue within the natural world and community.

**VD:** We are embodying theory as we walk and as we write .... [Stops and points]

The spider's web has just come into my focus – it is delicately robust – see the contact with air through its movement in the breeze but it's also interconnected and connected to its surrounds – attached, some holes and flexing within its limits... within its limits of tolerance.

Seeing this web, I am connecting Land Art with this moment and remembering my first experience of Andy Goldsworthy's work<sup>3</sup> 'live' as it were. A vast curtain, made only of horse chestnut twigs held together with thorns, stretched across the gallery ... visually showing interconnectedness ... it was so delicate, balanced; breathtaking. Movement in one part of the whole created movement in another. Both webs are amazing; each help me to make sense of this process of contact at the boundary.

We are approaching the last stretch of canal and summarise the range of topics touched on in the conversation. Our main focus has been on the power of relational contact with human, place and the natural environment in specific landscapes: the history of this canal and how waterways are part of the anatomy of this country just as fluids are rivers within our bodies. We have also reflected on the duality of trauma; destruction inflicted by humans on both other humans and on the other-than-human and vice versa. Belarus where both nature and people were destroyed; Australian bushfires, European refugee camps: each of these aspects of the total field illustrates that natural and human trauma are interwoven, and the ways in which regeneration and trauma are part of gestalts of destruction and (re)growth.

We stop; look at trees along a high bank. Their earth-embedded, interconnected root system is exposed and, looking across the water and up into the branches and canopy of the trees, this system is mirrored – for squirrels, a natural corridor.

## Sun: grounding the self

... where the inner world and the outer world meet  
and simultaneously enrich each other ...  
an I/Thou relation with the Earth.  
(Valerie Andrews)

In the previous three sections, we have been languaging our rationale and core argument through reflection on both theory and personal experiences of embodied, relational dialogue with the other-than-human and human world. In our individual practices as psychotherapist, supervisor and trainer<sup>4</sup> we had noticed that many clients and trauma workshop participants turn to the natural world to feel safe and connected. A collection of experiments offered through a series of co-facilitated early summer workshops provide phenomenal ‘data’ (Adams, 2015) from which we briefly illustrate the theoretical argument at the heart of this paper.

Whatever form of practice, the content and processes are underpinned by Gestalt principles: contact, experimentation, embodied presence and awareness, dialogue, mirroring and witnessing, since ‘*Extending [presence]* involves a process whereby therapists actively extend their boundary out to the other and to their surroundings’ (Geller and Greenberg, 2012, p. 39, italics original). We embedded a wide range of opportunities for present moment awareness and embodied enquiry, each of which stimulated contact through sensory receptors in the human body<sup>5</sup> (Olsen, 2002). Sensate experience through touch, sight or smell with soil brought from participants’ own land for example, made figural the human–earth contact

boundary. Considered alongside awareness that ‘we are made of the same minerals that comprise the soil’ (Olsen, 2002, p. 106), the interconnection between outside and inside was illuminated.

Another body/earth experiment focused on water exploring the Gestalt principle that the contact boundary is fluid and mutually constitutive rather than formed as an absolute meeting (Latner, in Nevis, 2000; Parlett, 1991). The movement of water through and across the land was observed and physical/sensory contact made with both elements giving rise to embodied, creative experiments about the various ways in which soil, water, animal, plant and human life meet. Olsen informs that ‘... the earth’s surface is about 71% water, roughly the same percentage as fluids in the human body’ (Olsen, 2002, p. 179).

Exploring presence involved, for example, spending time outside in the landscape, allowing a creature or other-than-living object to become figural, remaining attentive to and present with whatever emerged. Such emergent, dialogic contact is illustrative of Buber’s I–Thou attitude, ‘if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. The tree is now no longer an *It*’ (Buber 1958/1923, p. 20, italics original). By allowing an object or creature to witness them reciprocally, participants opened themselves to the gaze of ‘the other-than-human’ exploring the principle that ‘perception is the basis for connection’ (Olsen, 2002, p. 59; see also Abram, 1997).

Participants were also invited to share experiences:

‘A small bird landed in a hedge to my left. My energy stayed with her as we witnessed each other. I wondered briefly what else they have seen and how they were experiencing me now. I returned my attention fully to bird. I was not judged and did not judge; self-consciousness melted, my body relaxed. We saw ...’

We introduced storytelling to integrate many dimensions of experience (Olsen, 2002). This engages the limbic brain connecting interest, emotion and memory (Taylor, 2014) and has the capacity to stimulate right-brain activity (Pernicano, 2014). The giving, receiving and co-creation of narratives involved mirroring, witnessing, facilitating relationality as well as enabling experiences of relationship with the other-than-human world to be expressed.

## Discussion

In the workshops we have co-facilitated, our intention was to invite and support the development of awareness, contact and co-perception within the total field. We worked with the natural environment to offer and hold



ground. We invited participation in figure-forming experiments from which participants might experience the triangular relationship that is a distinctive element of nature-informed therapy (Berger, 2016). In essence, our approach was to make what is so frequently 'ground' specifically 'figural' and we have listened with interest to comments that emerged on arrival, immediately after a workshop, as well as in the days and months that followed. Some examples illustrate:

'I am traumatised by my work. I treat myself like a machine which means I also treat my clients like machines. If I don't take nourishing myself seriously, I will have to stop working.'

'I experienced the Earth sounds<sup>6</sup> in a very powerful way ... it was like nothing I'd ever heard before; an audio gravity, holding and grounding the whole workshop. Calming, nourishing and strengthening me for many hours afterwards.'

'I saw my client tonight and there was a very different energetic tone to our session ... we did some good work at greater depth than we've achieved before, and I can't help but think this weekend contributed significantly to that.'

Some months after the first workshop we enquired specifically whether and how participants felt they had integrated anything into their practice/life:

'What emerged from the workshop for me was how much trauma material I was carrying around with me and feeling in my body. I left behind my "over responsibility" and I would say that I am trusting more in the whole and the shared task of healing and supporting.'

'One of the ways I think my horizons were extended over the weekend was to start to include the human community in this "earth" grouping, and indeed, to allow myself to feel safe and welcome in a human group. That really struck me ... There's something about feeling truly grounded in the earth that's highly congruent and nourishing for me in work with death and grief.'

Overall, we note that embodied dialogic contact with nature revealed positive effects. This endorses the real benefits for therapists (and thus clients) of integrating relational contact with the natural and other-than-human world as an aspect of self-care.

## Conclusion: call and response

May our legs be strong and steady  
May our feet tread softly on the earth  
(Satish Kumar)

It is now midsummer. We set out to explore the ways that Gestalt theory and practice frame and inform the workshops we developed and the potential benefit of working in relationship with others and the natural environment. Our conclusion from this experiential work is that configuration in relation to the unified field has the potential to support and sustain an integrative reorganisation of self. Based on five premises about the impacts and processes involved in working with trauma or in traumatised or traumatising contexts, we have put forward our view that the natural world has much to offer the therapist or supervisor, about regeneration and the ethic of self-care.

During our joint workshops, stories emerged of culture, attachment and belonging associated with a strong sense of place, coming in alongside a sense of loss, stuckness, disconnection and absence. The rhythm of the rise and fall of these stories felt easy, with a quality evocative of storytelling, oral history and folk song. Resonant of the questions that came 'After the Storm', deep, existential themes emerged from connecting with the total field: 'How does the land sustain my living?', 'What happens to me when I die?', 'How do I connect?', 'How does life regenerate?'. Rejoinders are a form of call and response in dialogue with our elemental context. A profound acknowledgement of hope, interconnectedness and trust in regeneration has been expressed during and beyond the workshops. Movement from depletion towards energetic nourishment and holding one's ground, signal the generative qualities of this work. Our enquiries into whole field responsiveness have offered support for self-regulation and an expanded window of tolerance. In turn, this conclusion confirms our concept of the well-grounded therapist.

We position a re-engagement with the natural world as a function of the relational therapeutic field, and anticipate enduring effects. For us, the intersubjective field includes relationships within the total field:

The experience with the environment changes us quickly and quietly. By and large it is not a process to which words are attached. Nor are people aware of how radically affected they are by the way they see the world (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1998, p. 35).

There is a reciprocal process in the implicit realm of contact: first the traumatic resonance which replays in subtle ways, and second the implicit response which, through engagement with the natural world, may offer a different capacity to be present and bear witness. The deeper we can go with ourselves, the deeper the therapy

will go; the more connected we feel, the stronger the contact between ourselves and our clients; the more we open ourselves to wider perspectives, the more the therapy will open; the more integrated we become, the greater the possibility of the client becoming integrated. Supervisors and therapists alike need sustenance for their capacity to offer an expanded window of tolerance. The degree to which we can contain trauma and reorganise it in our own being, the more this will become true for the client.

We consider that the clinical implications of our thesis are significant. We agree with Carroll who states that ‘The therapist’s self-regulatory capacity within the relational context of psychotherapy is critical to their ability to consciously and non-defensively calibrate their interventions’ (2009, p. 102). It is crucial in meeting the very particular challenges of working with trauma that we reconfigure the field from a position of surfeit rather than of deficit. By holding the polarity of vitality and regeneration with a clear intention we can find the support to resonate with extreme states of distress. Finding a point at which we can gather our own ground allows the client’s system to organise in response. A grounded relational field provides the possibility of reawakening the embodied reorganisation that is the essence of healing.

Many factors appear to influence the restorative experience of the natural world. These include belonging, contact, context, curiosity, continuity of experience, waiting, hope, openness, soft fascination, presence, coherence, embodiment, integration, perspective and regulation. Seemingly simple, it is perhaps this level of subtlety and complexity that creates the right conditions for reorganising the relational field. We know that differentiation and specificity are ultimately integrative. Experiencing the other-than-human disrupts the linear, dysregulated and binary processes of trauma-based responses and permits a more complex adaptive state akin to the window of tolerance, every bit as necessary for the therapist as for the client (Taylor, 2014, p. 195).

Healing trauma is an ecological process, and it requires diligence to achieve the simplicity of being and presence that is needed. It has been our anticipation and experience in offering workshops that engagement in a mutually respectful relationship with the natural world engenders support. We open to transformative qualities of awe, stillness, mindfulness, creativity, and coherence of narrative. Interconnectedness of the unified field is humbling and reassures us that we do not experience any trauma – even ‘second-hand’ – alone. We all ignore ourselves as a part of this greater whole at a cost to ourselves and can choose instead to offer ourselves the level of respect and care that we bring to our clients. Attentive

care to all aspects of the field is, therefore, profoundly ethical and deeply political.

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## Notes

1. Well Grounded Therapist workshops have taken place during 2016, 2017 and 2018.
2. In May 2017, VD visited Blagovschtschina Woods, near Maly Trostinec in Belarus, as part of a commemorative trip for the murder of her great-aunt and many tens of thousands, possibly over a hundred thousand, Jewish people from the country now known as Belarus and transported from all over Europe. These mass murders in the woods near Minsk took place as part of the Final Solution by the Third Reich.
3. Yorkshire Sculpture Park (2007). Andy Goldsworthy at Yorkshire Sculpture Park [Exhibition], 31 March 2007–6 Jan 2008.
4. We first met at a series of Liminal Space workshops facilitated by Sally Denham-Vaughan and Martin Capps in 2013. Our first contact was a silent, paired walk and this established the ground of our relationship and collaboration. Interested in the embodied co-creation of the relational field, and knowing her embedded relationship with the land, MT then approached VD to collaborate on developing such work. Together, we have developed workshops ranging from a couple of hours long to a four-day residential ‘retreat’.
5. The special senses of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch are interoceptors (located in organs which monitor the inner workings of the body); exteroceptors (skin and connective tissues which monitor the outer environment) and proprioceptors (in joints, ligaments, tendons, muscles and the inner ear) register movement, balance and the body’s position in space and in relation to self and other.
6. As part of one group activity we played a recording of the sounds made in the Earth five miles below the surface.

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**Miriam Taylor** is a UKCP registered and accredited Gestalt psychotherapist, supervisor and international trainer. She is part of the Leadership Team of Relational Change. With over twenty-five years' clinical experience, Miriam specialises in working with trauma, focussing on how trauma is configured in the body and relationally. She is author of *Trauma Therapy and Clinical Practice: Neuroscience, Gestalt and the Body* (2014), and several articles. Her interest in listening deeply to the wider field led her to undertake a Wilderness Experience in the Eastern Sierra of California.

*Address for correspondence:* therapy@hereandnowely.co.uk

**Vienna Duff** is a UKCP registered and accredited Gestalt psychotherapist and Associate Lecturer with the Open University where she teaches about psychotherapeutic practice, forensic psychology and counselling. She is an associate of Relational Change, and a member of a UK Relational Change 'Community of Practice'. Currently employed as a psychotherapist and supervisor in an NHS Mental Health Service and a volunteer in a Rape and Sexual Abuse Support Centre, she also has a small private practice. Her therapeutic approach and interests are informed by more than thirty-five years of working collaboratively to establish safe, enabling and sustainable services for adult survivors of relational trauma.

She is curious about the transmission of trauma trans-generationally and the ways that healing can be facilitated inter-generationally and relationally. A personal reflection on The Trauma of War across Generations was published by the *British Gestalt Journal* (23(2)) in November 2014. She currently lives in Worcestershire and nourishes her self with land-art and travel.

*Address for correspondence:* Viennaduff@tiscali.co.uk