

UKAGP

The UK Association for Gestalt Practitioners

Summer 2021 UKAGP Newsletter: Request for Submissions



Pink Dawn (June 2020) Phot. Biran Nandi

'When the peonies bloomed,
It seemed as though were
No flowers around them.'

(Kiitsu)

The earliest peonies in our garden have huge fluorescent pink flowers with golden-yellow stamens. They are “Pink Dawn” variety – possibly the best flower to celebrate the Pride Month of June! Last year, during first lockdown, the weather conditions were perfect and peony flowers were enormous - about twice as big as the palm of my hand. My husband took several photos of them, but the one above with its black background caught my eye as it shows this gorgeous flower in its full glory: obscenely open and carefree, exposing its superb colours whilst soaking up the sun.

Flowers have been part of a coded language within the LGBTQ+ community for centuries. Take for instance green carnations popularised as a gay symbol by Oscar Wilde, who asked his friends to wear them on their lapels at the opening of *Lady Windermere's Fan* in 1892, or violets used by Sappho - a Greek poet, in her ancient verses when referring to lesbian love. Or the bold bright colours of pansies that led many to use the term “pansy” to represent particularly flamboyantly dressed queers and drag queens, and so, many gay bars throughout history had names such as “The Pansy Club.” The pansy features also in the name of the moving project, started in 2005 by Paul Harfleet in Manchester. Paul has been planting pansies at the sites of homophobic abuse. His *Pansy Project* (<https://thepansyproject.com/>) is a small act of commemoration, and a powerful message of resistance against ongoing acts of homophobia and transphobia. You can see the video about the project containing an interview with Paul at <https://vimeo.com/260493973>. Let's also not forget the symbolism of roses, which refers at times specifically to the trans community. ‘There is a phrase, “Give us our roses while we are still here”,’ says historian Sarah Prager, the author of *Rainbow Revolutionaries* - a recently published LGBTQ+ book for kids to read during Pride Month. ‘Trans people are murdered at alarming rates and the roses are associated with mourning since you lay roses on a grave.’ Therefore, roses are a symbol to honour them when they are still alive and see the beauty within. They also represent the fight for trans rights, which has come into prominence over the past couple of years.

And whilst, ordinarily, I tend to think of all the different flowers as representing the fertility of nature and the diversity of the world, when I see the “Pink Dawn” peonies striking a pose in our garden every June, as a proud queer person, I can't help but think of them as marking the beginning of annual celebrations of Pride Month, honouring the *Stonewall Riots* of June 1969, which were a catalyst for the gay liberation movement around the world.

As UKAGP Newsletter editor, I did not want to keep this important event to myself, but instead say more about the significance of June as a month when the world's LGBTQ+ community comes together. We celebrate the freedom to be ourselves, to teach tolerance, and to educate others about our history and ongoing struggle to overcome prejudice and be accepted for who we are. Such awareness is crucial not only for those of us who are gay or trans, but for all mental health practitioners working with gender, sex, and relationship diverse people. To my way of thinking, our emotional wellbeing and approach to therapy and counselling, and help seeking in general, can only be understood in the context of

homosexuality's and transgenderism's multifaceted and too often unfamiliar history. The term "Gay Pride" crafted by Thom Higgins, a gay rights activist in Minnesota in 1969, stands in opposition to shame and social stigma. The aim is to raise public awareness about the LGBTQ+ community, celebrate its' achievements, and educate about LGBTQ+ history.



Pansy planted by Paul Harfleet in Embankment Place, London © The Pansy Project 2020

Pride Month is also a good opportunity to remind ourselves of the important links between gestalt therapy and the LGBTQ+ rights movement, especially in its earlier history in the US. Take for instance Paul Goodman - one of the three main authors of our seminal text *Gestalt Therapy Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* (1951), who was an all-out queer, frank about his bisexuality and promiscuity. This proved to be costly to his career and reputation, but won him admiration from activists who created the modern gay rights movement. Author of *The Politics of Being Queer* (1969), he openly admitted how his homosexuality gave energy to his anarchism, utopianism and pacifism, whilst gay promiscuity facilitated breaking down class boundaries. Goodman was also critical of gay men of his times as being too apolitical or reactionary, arguing that 'freedom is indivisible,' something that only recently has been more fully accepted through rising awareness of intersectionality, which enables people to better acknowledge and ground differences as universal. I wonder what he would make of our current situation.

Let us also mention other LGBTQ+ persons who played a vital role throughout gestalt therapy history, including Isadore From and Richard Kitzler, pillars of the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy, and probably some of the most important teachers and researchers of

gestalt therapy. Over many decades they trained, mentored and influenced many contemporary psychotherapists in their hometown of New York, but also taught others beyond its boundaries, throughout the US and Europe.

By the way, Isadore From's twin brother Sam, also gay, played a vital role in the removal of homosexuality from the DSM III of the American Psychiatric Association, leading to its eventual acceptance as a normal sexual orientation. As a student at UCLA, Sam From became a close friend of psychologist Evelyn Hooker and introduced her to the gay and lesbian subculture of the early 1940s, later challenging her to scientifically study "people like him." Consequently, she administered several psychological tests to groups of self-identified male homosexuals and heterosexuals and asked experts to identify the homosexuals and rate their mental health. Her 1957 paper *The Adjustment of the Male Overt Homosexual* offered scientific evidence that gay men were perfectly socially adjusted. Her work eventually found a wider audience, was taken up by the gay rights movement, and finally led to the decriminalization of homosexuality and the provision of equal rights to people of all sexual orientations. There is an excellent Oscar nominated documentary about this ground breaking research and the struggle of the LGBTQ+ community for equal rights, *Changing Our Minds: The Story of Dr. Evelyn Hooker* (1992).

Another successful collaboration between gestalt therapists and the LGBTQ+ community on American soil was the creation of *Identity House* - an all-volunteer community providing counselling and support services for LGBTQ+ people established in the turmoil of the early 1970s during the AIDS epidemic in New York City. Many of its founders, such as Patrick Kelley and Lee Zevy, were Gestalt-trained and members of the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy (NYIGT). Kelley's outline for *Identity House* was firmly based on the principles of Gestalt approaching, contacting and withdrawal, creatively encountering the environment to destruct and build anew. This Gestalt experiment continues till this day and if interested you can read about its history in the article by Burt Lazarin, *Identity House and a Gestalt Experiment Revisited* in *Gestalt Review* (2019), Vol. 23, No. 3.

In the UK, probably the most notable impact of the LGBTQ+ people on the growth of gestalt therapy was the formation of the Metanoia Institute in 1984 by Petrūska Clarkson, Sue Fish and Brian Dobson. All three founders of Metanoia were of diverse sexualities, and Clarkson and Fish remained in a long-term same-sex relationship. All of them were migrants from South Africa during the apartheid era, as Lucy Watt documents in her commemorative piece written specifically for the Pride Jubilee, two years ago to mark 50 years since Stonewall. Metanoia, as a humanistic school of counselling and psychotherapy that continues to offer courses not exclusively in Gestalt, (e.g. TA and Person-Centred therapy), was a major alternative to the psychoanalytic training dominating psychotherapy field at that time. In those days it was commonplace for non-heterosexual people to be refused admission to psychoanalytic training programmes. Metanoia provided a welcome shelter for many LGBTQ+ people and offered an excellent level of professional training in psychotherapy

without prejudice and discrimination. To quote Lucy Watt, ‘they were ahead of their time in their rejection of labels, particularly Petrůska for whom labels represented restricting the objects of our desire, which was against much of her philosophical outlook to her teachings and work’. ‘Although the Metanoia founders’ sexual identities were not always explicitly defined, their very presence gave students of diverse sexualities permission to be themselves and, in some cases, to exist’. One could only wish for more psychotherapy training institutes to offer similar levels of acceptance and support for gender, sexual and relationship diverse people. Lucy Watt’s article is available on the Metanoia website: <https://www.metanoia.ac.uk/prospective-students/equality-and-diversity/equality-and-diversity-events/lgbtqplus-article/>.



Pride Jubilee - London 2019. Phot. Piotr Mierkowski

The above overview of connections between gestalt therapy and LGBTQ+ community is indeed very incomplete and compiled in some haste specially to celebrate Pride Month. My hope is that it will encourage you - our newsletter readers, to submit your own stories related to the above topic, but not exclusively. In fact bearing in mind the forthcoming September 2021 UKAGP Conference and its title, *Healing Dialogue: The Process of Inclusive Practice*, I wish us all to consider the many possible differences that might connect us; I am talking here about our different ethnicities, race, language, religions, disabilities, etc., and their varied intersectionalities. After all, in Gestalt therapy, to quote Gary Yontef (1993), ‘a person exists by differentiating self from other and by connecting self and other. These are

the two functions of a boundary. To make good contact with one's world, it is necessary to risk reaching out and discovering one's own boundaries. Effective self-regulation includes contact in which one is aware of novelty in the environment that is potentially nourishing or toxic. That which is nourishing is assimilated and all else is rejected. This kind of differentiated contact inevitably leads to growth.'

And so I return to my garden, which now, this late June, a day before summer solstice, is already in full bloom. The "Pink Dawn" are coming to an end of their short prominence only to be replaced by the later varieties of peonies; now it is time for likes of "Bartzella", "Sarah Bernhardt" "Dinner Plate", and "Dr Jekyll" to take on the world- each blossom more beautiful than the other in its own unique way, flashing different colours of their exquisite flowers and bold foliage, some more scented than others. They are now all young and healthy and in the prime of their life. I am delighted to find that even the earlier heavy rainfall has not been strong enough to crush their more delicate pink and red variety, which reminds me of peonies described by Mary Oliver. I chose to finish my *Call for Submissions* with this particular poem as it seems to invite the openness and creativity that I wish to enthuse you with. There is a certain recklessness in allowing ourselves to open as naturally, as shamelessly as peonies in response to their inner rhythm. We may even fear our own full bloom, not even allow ourselves to imagine it. All around us nature with the sun's buttery old fingers and the moon's silken, cool breath beckons us to be even just a bit more recklessly creative.



Pink Peonies and Black AIs (June 2021) Phot. P. Mierkowski

'This morning the green fists of the peonies are getting ready
to break my heart
as the sun rises,
as the sun strokes them with his old, buttery fingers

and they open ---
pools of lace,
white and pink ---
and all day the black ants climb over them,

boring their deep and mysterious holes
into the curls,
craving the sweet sap,
taking it away

to their dark, underground cities ---
and all day
under the shifty wind,
as in a dance to the great wedding,

the flowers bend their bright bodies,
and tip their fragrance to the air,
and rise,
their red stems holding

all that dampness and recklessness
gladly and lightly,

and there it is again ---

beauty the brave, the exemplary,

blazing open.

Do you love this world?

Do you cherish your humble and silky life?

Do you adore the green grass, with its terror beneath?

Do you also hurry, half-dressed and barefoot, into the garden,

and softly,

and exclaiming of their dearness,

fill your arms with the white and pink flowers,

with their honeyed heaviness, their lush trembling,

their eagerness

to be wild and perfect for a moment, before they are

nothing, forever?’

(“Peonies” by Mary Oliver, 2004)

I am inviting all of you wholeheartedly, to join me in preparing the forthcoming Summer Edition UKAGP Newsletter. Do write about anything that you like, your personal lives and your work, the state of the planet and state of your minds and bodies this summer. We welcome serious essays and articles as much as short funny and entertaining pieces of writing, poetry and prose, sketches, photographs and other artwork. You may wish to suggest an interesting article to read, write a book or film review, and describe something that touched you personally. All of this and more is relevant.

All contributions to the UKAGP Newsletter can be sent to admin@ukagp.org.uk or myself: publicity@ukagp.org.uk. We have extended our deadline, to allow for more submissions. To ensure their inclusion in our summer issue please email us by the next deadline of 18th July 2021. This coincides with the date of our AGM. I look

forward to hearing from you soon, and hopefully to see you at the AGM. In the meantime, I wish you all the best for the forthcoming month.

With warm wishes,

Piotr Mierkowski

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