

Malcolm Parlett's Marianne Fry Lecture, July 2008

Living Beyond Limits: Hubris, Collapse, and the Embodied Return

1. The Title and What it Means

My title is ambitious and needs some explanation. Let me start with Living Beyond Limits: the incontestable fact of limits and the fact that we're living beyond them. The global population more than doubled between 1950 and 2005 from 2.6 billion to 6.4 billion. And of course it's set to rise massively further. By 2002 humans were consuming food, materials and energy at a rate of about 1.2 Earth equivalent planets. Those two statistics almost say it all, in terms of living beyond our limits.

Of course you are assailed, as I am, by information of this kind almost every time that we turn on the radio for news or look at the box, suggesting that things are pretty bad in all kinds of directions. There are increases or decreases that indicate that limits are being reached in a whole different number of ways. Thus, up go average global temperatures and the use of fossil fuels, and also the size of cities and the move to cities. A mass of other trends are also on the rise: for example, the prevalence of teenage suicides; the amount of porn on the internet; obesity; the spread of AIDS; the disparities between rich and poor; access to nuclear weapons material; and the price of crude oil. Other limits are expressed as decreases. Thus, in terms of decreasing trends or losses at a global level: down go the number and the size of glaciers; down goes bio-diversity and there is less and less cultural uniqueness among indigenous peoples; the number of languages spoken in the world is falling, the availability of drinking water is dropping, and other declines are obvious too, like the extent of inter-generational family living, and local traditions. In other words, limits of many kinds have already been reached, or crossed, or stretched to breaking point.

Of course, there are many ways in which changes can be looked at, and limits portrayed. There are other indices and changes I could list that could represent signs of positive and hopeful changes – for instance in the slow advance of women's rights or

consciousness of children's needs. But the good news statistics do not wipe out the reality of those which I have cited. Another perspective is to recognise how implicated we all are. Most of us are inclined to take much of our way of life for granted. We do not question, other than fleetingly, the implicit assumptions of having advantage and of our right to live with an expanding economy. We are in this country rich by world standards, and a majority of the population can have much of what they want when they want it. Many former luxuries have become present-day "essentials". So the question of limits and the assumptions of taken-for-granted "as if" limitlessness impact us personally. These assumptions can form much of the ground of our own thinking.

In addition, this week has brought some terrible economic news by conventional criteria. And I thought as the week wore on that I had some kind of moral responsibility not to assail you with too much and to plunge you into the depths of gloom. I didn't want collective despondency to settle over the day. However, I think all of us recognise that in human history this is a period of crisis, of massive, puzzling dilemmas – both short- and long-term – and also perhaps, if we can look through a more positive lens, a potential turning point in the face of the global crisis. We need to remember that – as a word – "crisis" has a double meaning, suggesting both danger and opportunity.

I'm not alone in saying that if I look at the science and the facts and the statistics and the various trends, I can go to a despairing place. David Ballard¹ has studied environmentalists and the people who write about environmental matters and found that many are motivated to carry on with their work through deep fear, recognisable as legitimate serious concern, about the consequences for our children's children (and their children...) of the ways in which human beings currently live on the planet. However, rarely is their personal passion and concern expressed because all their writing is in the language of "techno-rationality", as I shall be referring to it in this lecture.

Faced with our living beyond limits we can feel despair. The prospects for the human race are not good. But if I shift towards my feelings, I certainly can find numerous reasons for a shift away from despair – not towards outright optimism but to preserving some sense that the capacity of our silly old species is such that even at the eleventh hour we might find our way towards sanity.

And this is the message that I tend to carry in my body because, frankly, if I didn't I would go potty. I want to hold this feeling of optimism in the face of potential despair as an underpinning for this lecture.

I have other things to say about how I am approaching the topic of living beyond limits. The things I shall deal with derive a lot from my passion and interest in the Gestalt therapy movement and its way of thinking which I first encountered, almost exactly to the day, 33 years ago. And it's excited me ever since, and has satisfied me in some crucial ways. I approach the issue of our planetary predicament from the point of view of a Gestalt practitioner.

It is relevant that at the centre of Gestalt thinking, as manifested in psychotherapy and in other ways as well, is concern with the relationship between the person and the environment. Human beings are inextricably connected to the world that we live in and to the patterns of activity that go on in it. Unavoidably we are part of cultures and sub-cultures. Each of us is therefore a "person-in-environment", a "body-in-the-world". So for therapists, for instance, this means we are not just looking at the intra-psychic neuroses of individuals in isolation but instead are probing the manifold complexities of the interrelationship between ourselves -- our past experience which has formed us as we are and which we carry in our bodies -- and the environment, the whole humanly constructed context in which we presently function and live our lives. And that's where the focus of Gestalt therapy is to be found. There is a wonderful new Gestalt book written by Georges Wollants² which I strongly recommend: its title is *Gestalt Therapy: Therapy of the Situation* – the situation, field, or "lifespace", that meeting place between body and world, is what we're really investigating in therapy, and in other Gestalt activities.

Anyway, with this priority at the heart of Gestalt, it is clear that the issue of how we live in the world today is also very personal. The way we handle and make sense of our context or environment is individual to each of us. Thus, this week we have been faced with the same bleak economic news. But it's the "same/different" economic news, because it means something for each person in a unique way and we handle it all differently. Thus, personally for me, I need to take in the bad news, not ignore it, but also to put it alongside another thought, which I offer to you as well: "Even if the news seems pretty awful, let's pause for a moment to celebrate

something else, which is the amazing existential miracle of our being alive. Here, this morning, hearts beating, lungs filling, feeling our aliveness.” I believe we have to hold different realities simultaneously and this particular one is one we can always return to, especially when the news is depressing.

In setting the scene, I also need to comment on the other parts of my title, so I am going to move on now to the next word: “hubris”.

The Greek word “hubris” means being puffed up with overweening pride and self-confidence, treating the views of others with contempt. Recently I came across David Owen’s book³ *The Hubris Syndrome – Bush, Blair and the intoxication of power*. In it he describes the “hubris syndrome” as “excessive confidence in your own judgement, contempt for the advice and criticism of others... an unshakable belief that we will be vindicated ... (and) loss of contact with reality” (p. 2). He points out, in reference to Iraq, that “No British Prime Minister since 1914 – not Lloyd George, not Churchill, not even Eden over Suez, has made the strategic decisions over war so personally and without systematically involving senior Cabinet colleagues as Blair did... The full Cabinet potentially acted as a rubber stamp on decisions which Blair and a small coterie of colleagues and advisers took in No.10 on foreign policy.”(p. 103)

Hubris has an important part in how it is that we are living beyond limits. I shall be suggesting that there’s a hubristic element in what I will be describing as the “dominant world view” – a world view that I want to challenge today. In particular, this world view embraces techno-rational thinking and language so completely and without question that its proponents treat alternative conceptions of human being and contrasting ways of knowing with something approaching contempt. This has immediate relevance for many of us here in that the Gestalt approach operates in a deliberately *non*-techno-rational way, with an emphasis on downplaying conceptual, jargon-bound, or abstract representations of phenomena in favour of direct experiencing of them. It is at the centre of my remarks today that the shift to direct experiencing and getting beyond the formalism of techno-rational ways of thinking and talking, is an essential component in changing the way we are responding to the world crisis.

I imagine those of us who have identified with Gestalt or other similar approaches have experienced times of being on the receiving end of certain signs of contempt. The raised eyebrows, the little smiles from people, the instant dismissals – an alternative outlook, challenging the conventional one, is often dismissed out of hand. Thus Gestalt, along with numerous other non-techno-rational approaches, is described as “purely subjective, not objective, not hard science but very soft, all very impressionistic and unproven”, its effects non-measurable and therefore useless. So that’s where hubris came into the mix of things that I have been thinking about as I prepared this lecture. It’s the hubris shown in believing one way of thinking – the predominant world view – and looking down on alternative ways of knowing without any felt need to investigate them at all.

In this process of attending to my title, I’m not going to say much about “collapse”, the next term. We see it happening all around us. There is confusion, upset, shock, and fear as what seem like established ways of being and ways of conducting human affairs are found to be not working very well or are being swept aside by events over which people clearly don’t have any control. And given this week has been particularly full of depressing economic news, I am reminded of an interview with a central banker that I read some six to nine months ago. He pointed out that while those in central banks had always in the past been able to keep some kind of checks and balances in tracking huge movements of capital around the world, those safeguards weren’t there any more, and they really didn’t have any clear and direct sense of what was happening in the global financial market. I’m reminded of the line from W H Auden: “We are led by forces we scarcely understand.”

The last phrase of my title is the “embodied return”. This is where most of my remarks are going to be concentrated. Basically, the essence of my argument today is as follows. (1) To use a popular phrase, the wheels of our present society show signs of falling off or at least they are looking as if they’re shaky, certainly pretty wobbly. (2) This failure, with all the uncertainty it engenders, is not a one-off blip, a temporary matter, and correctable for instance by a change of government, but rather is something much more fundamental – it is an outgrowth of the whole mode of living that human beings have developed over several hundred years, in a pattern that is very well known: it is a pattern, including ways of thinking and experiencing the world, that belongs to and grows out

of the dominant world view, that extols techno-rationalism, and has lost or downplayed some of our human capacities that are contrary to this world view. (3) For any change to come about, any fundamental change, the world view itself needs to be revised, in such a way that it becomes more hospitable to a different kind of knowing – a knowledge that grows out of being more embodied.

2. *The Dominant World View*

What I am calling the dominant world view has emerged as a result of the whole legacy of our industrial past, the explosive growth in technology, as well as the shared assumptions of Anglo-Saxon philosophy.

Developments in society have led to increasingly complex and organised administrative and technological systems coming into existence. We can see how human systems become ever more centralised, vast, computer-dependent, and impersonal. Many are global in scope, hierarchical in form, bureaucratic in style, and are led by leaders remote from the workplace or close-up environment. There is often a disconnection between how these vast systems operate and their original human intention. Moreover, the various complex arrangements are highly connected, interdependent, and together – as an encompassing human context – impact huge segments of lived existence, shaping individuals' personal situations to an extraordinary extent, even if often taken-for-granted as background "givens", apparently beyond question.

Arguably, despite bringing enormous benefits (as we well know exist and as apologists for the dominant world view forever emphasise), the various inter-linked systems have ways of functioning that taken together also diminish the capacity for human beings to act in relation to what they know in a direct, hands-on, personally experienced fashion. The example I mentioned earlier – concerning the remarks from the central banker – demonstrates the felt lack of adequate human control in the financial area that they experience.

One result of this disconnection between big systems and individual lives and agency, is that quite often nowadays, in order to do something sensible, we have to go "against (or around) the system". An example, from experience of living in Knighton – the little Welsh border town near to where Sally and I have our home –

is that Sally goes into the sorting office and says “We’re going away for two weeks, so please can you hold on to our mail and we’ll come and collect it when we come back.” And that usually suffices. However, on one occasion, the man replies, “Well, do you want to do it the official way or the unofficial way?” The unofficial way is what we have always done – keep our mail till we return from our travels and going into the sorting office and asking for it. The official way, it turns out, involves form-filling, payment of a fee, and the rolling out of bureaucratic procedures supposedly designed for efficiency but which have the opposite effect, certainly where we live. In reality, the new system means a lot of work for them, a pain for us, and is unnecessary. So Sally says “The unofficial way, please.” Common sense and simplicity win out. We’re just hopeful that some new manager from outside the area will not be appointed who outlaws the procedure.

This little example is revealing of a trend that we can recognise. I imagine we can all come up with examples of absurdities and frustrations, faced with impersonal big systems operating in ways that seem unsupportive of meeting straightforward needs in everyday life. The tendency towards greater impersonality and a more “removed” approach is in conflict with a Gestalt therapy orientation – namely, that we need to be attuned to the other if we’re to connect with them, life works better if we deal with people directly, and we operate best as situated and embodied beings contacting the real. We need to encounter circumstances on the ground and operate with our whole selves.

You will see that these principles entail moving in the *opposite* direction from assumptions embedded in the dominant mode of operating. Techno-rational thinking, linked to generalised systems that impose a standardised framework of understanding, procedures and bureaucratic steps, are all too likely to lead to ironing out human variations, eradicating informal arrangements, ignoring local solutions, and discouraging more personal aspects of everyday transactions.

I have been referring to what I call the dominant world view. More precisely, what do I mean by this? I am drawing here on the admirable book by Charlene Spretnak⁴, *The Resurgence of the Real* where she talks about the encompassing phenomenon of “hypermodernity”. She points out that “modern life is shaped by interlocking ideologies...(by) normative belief systems” that are

generally given “little thought”...”the complex web of assumptions and conditions in which modern society’s predicaments are embedded is not recognized..” There is an “encompassing phenomenon...(in which) the very shape of our lives is enmeshed in the assumptions and conditions of a way of being”(pp. 1-6) that is taken for granted, dominant, and existentially unquestioned. More specifically, (and I am quoting selectively here and modifying some of Spretnak’s language while remaining faithful to her ideas) she argues that this general world-view or overall perspective includes the following:

- Proper economic arrangements are believed to be the means of bringing contentment in all other spheres of life. The human being is essentially an economic being.
- Economic expansion is the Holy Grail, and leads to abundance, wellbeing, and the evolution of society.
- The past is continually being improved upon and the future will be more of the same but embracing more of the wealth that will be generated through increased industrialism and computerization, as well as competition, bureaucratic efficiency, and centralization.
- Technological advances, including medical ones, are a triumphant force of progress in opposition to nature.
- Spiritual life and religion, along with all other superstitions and scientifically unproven phenomena, are devalued as unnecessary for the good life. Indeed human beings can be liberated from these to their benefit.
- It’s unfortunate that traits considered masculine – like being rational – are prized more than those considered feminine – like empathy. But rationality and scientific enquiry are supreme.
- The task with each individual is to create a do-it-yourself universe in order to make more meaning out of their lives. (pp. 40-41, 219-221)

This world view, which is American-led, Western-espoused, and more or less universally sought-after and imitated, is (I suggest) dominant and taken as read by great swathes of the world population. However, it is also in some crucial ways now coming up for question. It is high time it was.

The environmentalist writer Paul Hawken has written an absorbing account, suggesting that a huge counter-force to this dominant world view is, in fact, already under way. The questioning is

happening on the ground. He describes a “world-wide grass-roots-led, decentralised, and network-based movement”, not led by any one or by any one group in particular, that is fast emerging. His book, *Blessed Unrest – How the largest movements in the world came to being and why no one saw it coming* – documents this emerging counterforce. As he went round and to lecture about environmental matters, he realised that wherever he went people would come up to him at the end of his talks and ply him with little cards and pamphlets about various projects that they were involved in or knew about. And he began to collect these and he ended up with bags of the stuff. He discovered there were literally thousands of small-scale initiatives that were “broadly environmental, or to do with social justice”, addressing a whole variety of themes: “air pollution, biodiversity, green business, rights of the child, and hunger; women’s health, urban ecology, gay rights, pesticides, good governance, access to education, land use policy, water rights, eco villages”, in other words a great spread of concerns, a diversity of human interests. He points out that this shift hasn’t acquired any all-inclusive name – the “Environmental Movement” doesn’t do it justice as so much of it is to do with social justice issues. He also points out that it’s “fuelled obviously by the ease of networking” due to new technology. And that it’s “fundamentally bottom-up”. It arises from lots of mainly small-scale initiatives “responding to people’s interests and local concerns”. What unifies it, Hawken says, are “ideas not ideologies” – an important distinction. “Big ideologies arose in the nineteenth century and dominated the twentieth – capitalism, communism, socialism, materialism, fundamentalism, (ideologies) prevent diversity and flourishing of ideas, impose uniformity of views.... Whereas ecologists and biologists know that systems achieve stability and help through diversity, not uniformity. Ideologues take the opposite view.”

In short, Hawken suggests that global themes are emerging in response to “cascading ecological crises and human suffering”. These ideas include the need for “radical social change, the reinvention of market-based economies, the empowerment of women, activism on all levels and the need for localised economic control”. (p.194). There are “insistent calls for autonomy...and a rising demand for radical transparency in politics and corporate decision making.” He predicts and concludes “The world is a system and it will soon be a very different world, driven by millions of communities who believe that democracy and restoration are

grass-roots movements will emerge that will connect us to values that we hold in common.”

He acknowledges some of the obvious pitfalls as well: that the extreme diversity means there is little cooperation and connection between the different activities and often there can be competition between groups doing similar things. Some groups are caught in narcissistic patterns of believing they alone are the saviours and the only cause that matters. And, of course, because they are so diverse and disconnected, there is no coming together “in a united front that can counter the massive scale and power of the global corporations and lobbies that protect the *status quo*.”

There is, in Britain, obviously a similar phenomenon. Where we live, on the edge of a small Welsh border town, a whole host of changes are in progress. The local environmental group has conducted an exercise in carbon foot-printing. (We’ve discovered that our household uses about 10 times over what we should be using.) It’s become a “fair trade” town. It’s setting out – this tiny little town – to become energy sustainable, creating as much energy as it uses; part of this may involve harnessing the water flow in the River Teme. There is a fortnightly farmers’ market and now a local organic vegetable market. All of these initiatives have happened in the last five years.

And something slightly different – since we’re in the heart of *Spark* country (for those who’ve come from outside of the area it refers to a quarterly listings paper that’s published in Bristol for the area) – a look at the magazine shows there’s an extraordinary diversity of activities. Notices and adverts jostle together. I looked at one issue, and in their listing I found an MA in Human Rights in the University of West of England: How should Bristol tackle climate change locally? This appears next to an advertisement for Qi Gong and homeopathy. Then there’s the Penny Brohn Cancer Care nestling up to “listening skills” at BCPC. There are also the following: the Cottage Cooperative Organic Vegetarian Café, Eco Retreats in Wales, Natural Cosmetics, Solar Energy, Sustrans, Organic Vegetable Boxes, and Drumming for Relaxation. In other words, something substantial IS happening – in different ways, in different places. Something like a movement, involving more and more people, is indeed coming about – in the form of numerous micro-activities in the face of macro problems.

The groundswell of activities represented here is in reaction to a view of the world that is regarded as normal in much of British society, that I have been calling the dominant world view. Many of the causes and approaches are innovative and some are cutting edge in social and ecological developments. Arguably, when put together they may be indications of a revolutionary movement. And in case you think that “revolution” is to overstate it, Hawken points out in his book that “the Industrial Revolution went un-named for more than a century – in part because its developments did not fit conventional categories but also because no one could define what was taking place, even though it was evident everywhere.”

So the dominant world view, its assumptions along with its hubristic dogma, may be beginning to collapse as new forms are emerging. Also, unsettlement of the dominant world view becomes most evident when those participating in it encounter something that touches them personally – in the parlance, when it is “in their face”. So, for instance, for those immersed in upholding the present model of the financial system, the people who run the extraordinarily complex system – economists at the Treasury, directors of the FSA and the central banks, and the whole community of financial experts in the City of London and Wall Street – it’s when they’re confronted by the queues outside the Northern Rock bank or the shattered share price at Bear Stearns, that they really grasp, in an embodied way, what collapse entails; and the collapse or the fear of some immense upheaval or disturbance, begins to strike them. It’s when we’re brought back to real people in real situations that makes ultimately the difference in people’s understanding. That is the point when we emerge from inside of the bubble of accepted normal thinking that they (or we) have been living within, from the protections we take for granted, and wake up to the fact that they (or we) have a very vulnerable system that is not a remote “as if” world but one that is human-based and real and could disintegrate. We grasp the issues at an embodied level.

One of my coaching clients is herself a consultant and she works in the financial sector. And she was describing one man’s reaction to the convulsion in the markets: “He was in a complete state of apoplexy really...like a wind-up doll that suddenly had stopped in shock. He hadn’t any other life.” One of the results of that was that he turned on one of his subordinates, as if he needed “the fix, the

pump of adrenalin and combat in negotiating deals that he had been used to.”

In the second part of my lecture, I will be going further into the embodied nature of our experience. The changes that are likely to come about as the dominant world view comes under more and more strain may lead to potential confusion and chaos, and increase the importance of local activism and do-it-yourself responses. Our lives almost certainly will be upturned in one way or another. We will experience changes up close, in the ways in which we live our lives. Joanna Macy calls it “The time of the Great Turning”, an upheaval of huge proportions with vast, albeit painful, potential for human learning. David Korten, another futurist writer, while hoping for a Great Turning has talked about it also as possibly the time of a “Great Unravelling”. We cannot assume that good will come out of the huge changes that are coming, or that it will be easy, for any of us.

Finally, in this part of the lecture, I want to lay out my belief that the very essence of the problem with the dominant world view will not have been addressed if we do not recognise the embodied nature of our humanity. This is the key. Embedded in the present dominant world view, in a way that is much more rarely challenged than other parts of it are, is the idea that the body is a machine. It is an “objectified body” model which is perceived as normal and intrinsic to the dominant world view – a view that in other ways is beginning to be questioned. The accepted, dominant, “normal” view of our bodies and minds challenges the very notion that I’ve begun to suggest – *that, ultimately, if we’re to act intelligently and to make meaning of how to act in the world in a way that is truly creative, we cannot afford to disregard that we are “knowing bodies”*.

In order for there to be a fundamental shift in the ways in which human beings live, increasing the probability of a Great Turning rather than merely a Great Unravelling, we need also a fundamental shift of consciousness – a particular shift – one in which the body is not seen just as a container for the mind but as central to our intelligent experiencing of the world around us. The separations of mind from body, intellect from feeling, abstract conceptualising from personal doing, is being challenged as never before by discoveries in the fast developing field of neuroscience. The notion that our intellect is the most reliable, the primary and

the only legitimate source of knowing is beginning to be questioned and needs to be understood for its centrality.

Assembled here today are educators, clinicians, spiritual guides, therapists, almost all of us working with people, and we have a high responsibility. We need fully to understand the shift in magnitude of inviting people to become “knowing bodies”. This is, I suggest, our particular contribution to the Great Turning.

Part Two

3. Embodying as an Ability

One of the things that Marianne Fry and I very much agreed about was that Gestalt ideas and practice needed to be communicated into the world more. If the strengths of the approach were to be understood more widely, we had to find better ways of talking to people about Gestalt therapy and consultation who were not familiar with the approach. One of the things I have been involved in for about ten years now has been an attempt to do just that. I have been exploring a particular reframing of the Gestalt outlook oriented more to non-therapeutic audiences.

In the process I have identified five key areas of human competence and potential which I have called “abilities”. They are supports and resources for individuals and for society, as human abilities often are. I came across them through considering how people who are engaged in a Gestalt education or in the personal explorations of Gestalt therapy appear to go through personal changes. In effect they are gaining additional competence in certain identifiable ways of operating in the world. These I have put together and named the five abilities. The more I thought about them, the more I realised they were fundamental competences that human beings already manifest to a greater or lesser extent. While present in the background, and taken-for-granted, they can also be focused upon, studied, and strengthened. I realised too that these abilities apply not just to individuals but you can talk about whole systems utilising them as well, from small families to medium-sized organisations, and even large communities and big systems. The abilities provide a shorthand way of depicting certain qualities of behaviour and experience, qualities to consider not as optional extras but as essential for sound living-in-the-world. Thus, a lot of mental health problems can be reframed in terms of these abilities

having been either little developed or their having been overwhelmed by counter-forces that negate or undermine them. Likewise, affirming and supporting these life abilities can be a positive and preventative step towards greater health in its widest meaning.

It is not my intention today to describe these abilities – or meta-competencies, or dimensions of experience – at any length. However, in considering the embodied return, they offer some language to refine what “being more embodied” can mean for us, since embodying is one of the five abilities, and like all of them requires the others to be manifested as well. The abilities are mutually interdependent and overlapping.

Let me summarise what they are, as I said, very briefly. There is no fixed order.

The first one I will mention refers to how we organise ourselves to do what we are doing in response to situations we encounter; how we adapt and also initiate, act, take responsibility. I call this *responding*.

Second, there is our ability to relate together in groups and organisations and also one-to-one with another person; how we deal with differences and conflict, and how in general we relate to “what is not me but other”. This I refer to as *interrelating*.

A third ability is about how we become cognizant and aware of we are of what we’re doing, and how we reflect on living and being in the world, and how we make sense of our life and purpose. I call this the realm of *self-recognising*.

And then, fourth, there are the ways in which we explore present possibilities and opportunities, our ability to learn, and grow – altering or changing self-limiting habitual ways of thinking and acting, and this I call *experimenting*.

The fifth one, (and for our purposes today the first in significance), refers to how what we are doing and being touches us at a fully human and feeling level, and how we experience and express who we are with all of our being – emotionally, physically through our senses and musculature, and energetically – and not just through

language and ideas, not just as a talking head. And this is the ability I have called *embodying*.

In developing these ideas, I have come to realise that *embodying* is by far the most difficult for people living in our society in Britain. I imagine that if I was living in some other part of the world – in South America, for instance, or in parts of Africa – that this capacity for people to be “in their bodies” or “comfortable in themselves as physical beings” might be something that is deeply ingrained, an established given of their society. In five abilities terms, *they* might need to focus especially on one of the other abilities, like responding or self-recognising. But *embodying*, they know it well.

As I have already said, the abilities are co-emergent and co-dependent upon each other, in other words, mutually necessary, with each one requiring the other four abilities to come into play fully for it to be fully manifested.

In the second part of this lecture I am wanting to talk about specific ways that we can make a difference through becoming more embodied. Specifically I want to point out how *embodying* supports the whole of our human experience, our capacity to live well, and to stay resilient. In other words, how *embodying* supports the other four abilities: how it supports action and intelligent responding; how it informs attunement and more satisfying interrelating; how it underpins self-care and is central in self-recognising; and how *embodying* is also necessary for the experimenting that we inevitably have to undertake in a fast-moving world environment.

4. How the Body Became Thought of as “Unknowing”

But there is a step before this in considering embodiment. Earlier, I talked about the dominant world view, with its built-in assumptions and taken-for granted views. These include regarding human beings and their needs predominantly as being economic, like operating units in a vast system. I pointed out that such thinking underpins the most powerful and influential global institutions of the contemporary world and is widely regarded as basic, unchallengeable truth. This is despite evidence of a huge grass-roots movement of people of the world towards questioning some of its certainties – for instance, the efficiency of centralised

systems, and top-down organisations that pay little attention to local needs.

I also alluded to the list of assumptions embedded in the dominant world view that includes the assumption of the “objectified body”. And my challenge today is that unless *this* particular basic belief gets to shift, the full intelligence and potential of human beings will continue to be limited and misunderstood. The concept of the objectified body – regarded by science and medicine as the “true” picture – includes regarding our physical form and fleshy substance as a medical, physiological, biochemical structure – which happens to have consciousness that will some day come to be explained in the terms of brain science as simply another biological phenomenon. My proposal is that this approach to the body may not be entirely wrong but that it needs to be complemented by a different perspective – one that acknowledges a *knowing* body which is central to lived, subjective, actuality-oriented experience.

At this point I want to quote something from the book by Lakoff and Johnson called *Philosophy in the Flesh – the Embodied Mind and its challenge to Western Thought*.⁵ In this book the authors show how the various metaphysics in philosophical theory flow from its metaphors, which are body-based and revealed by cognitive science. I want to focus on the section of the book which they call “Our Cartesian Inheritance”, and specifically on how Descartes formulated his basic theory which has dominated our thinking and our philosophy ever since. Descartes, (and I quote) “has left us with a theory of mind and thought so influential that its main tenets are still widely held and have barely begun to be reevaluated.” (p. 408) This theory has come down to us in a way that has been essentially unquestioned: as “a collection of self-evident truths.” They go to list some of the “Cartesian picture of mind that we have inherited”. Thus:

- “What makes human beings human...(and) that defines their distinctive nature, is their capacity for rational thought.”
- “Thought is essentially disembodied, and all thought is conscious.”
- “Thought consists of formal operations on ideas without regard to the relationship between those ideas and the external reality.”
- “Nothing about the body, neither imagination nor emotion nor perception nor any detail of the biological nature of the body,

need be known in order to understand the nature of the mind.” (p 408)

In their repudiation of Descartes, Lakoff and Johnson argue forcibly for a different point of view: “Reason,” they say, “is not disembodied as the tradition has largely held, but arises from the nature of our brains, bodies, and bodily experience.” (p. 4) They are not simply making the claim that “we need a body to reason” (*ibid*). Instead, they make the “claim that the very structure of reason itself comes from the details of our embodiment” (*ibid*). In short, what enables us to see and take in information and also to move around in the environment also underpins “our conceptual systems and models for reason”. Understanding how we see and move is the route to understanding reasoning. Reason is not disembodied but arises as an extension of how we perceive and move. Reason “is shaped crucially by the peculiarities of our human bodies” and brains. We can understand what they are saying because we ourselves make a lot of use of the same metaphors as Descartes used. Thus we say “I see what you’re saying” or “You can *look at* the argument this way” or “We *arrive at* the conclusion”. The very metaphors that Descartes has condensed are body-based and grounded in the physical reality of our animal existence, meaning that the disembodied mind was illusory. We are, in fact, totally and inescapably embodied – that is, there is no separate “mind” disengaged from the body.

We can recognise part of the legacy of this all-powerful, and in Britain and the USA largely unquestioned, philosophical approach: namely, that there has been an overriding emphasis on the objectified body and more generally on supporting what I have been calling “techno-rationality”. Cartesian ideas are behind the advantaging and privileging of conceptualising, logic, and rational argument over other forms of conscious experience – and thus the automatic superiority of “hard” over “soft” sciences, so called; the discounting, avoidance, or strict separation of emotions; the dismissal – too easy dismissal – of the subjectivity of feeling states; and the disavowal of deeply felt personal reactions. In advocating a view of our having – or *being* – a knowing body and this being essential for our functioning in the world, we are promoting a view that in effect has been consistently outlawed or disparaged for a very long time.

In advocating a post-Cartesian philosophical stance, we are following in the wake of others who have done so. Of course there are philosophers, in particular Maurice Merleau-Ponty,⁶ who have taken huge steps in integrating the body back into philosophy and it's very interesting that Merleau-Ponty is being quoted much more widely and taken more seriously now than ever before; mostly he has been dismissed and overlooked in the Anglo-American philosophical world.

There's another influence that has also taken us away from honouring the body – namely, its being seen in the past as a chaotic, out-of-control, animal-like, literally beastly, part of the human frame and activity. The mind, on the other hand, was the guide, censor, or controller which stops the body, if you like, from getting into trouble. I remember talking to Sonia Nevis about how the body was a source of essential information, and she pointed out that her body easily spoke to her and said she should have “lots of chocolate!” That made me realise how complicated it is to speak of a “knowing body”. I'm not saying the notion of a knowing body is straightforward. Clearly it isn't. Escaping dualism, our knowing body includes our thinking function, our imagining and remembering. But thinking cannot be divorced from the rest of our being, it is always embedded in the context of our lives, who we are and our immediate situation, so it's the bringing together of different elements in our awareness rather than privileging some parts of it (reason and symbolic thought) as separate and somehow superior to the rest of our experiencing.

5. *Embodying*

It isn't surprising that people find embodying difficult – that is, that they become massively desensitised and “are not fully IN their bodies”. We don't even have the physical experiences that our grandparents had. Many of us can heat our houses by flicking a switch. And we don't have to shovel and carry in coal, which I still remember from my childhood we used to have to do. (I can still recall the sound of the shovel grating along the bottom of the coal bunker when we went to fill the coal scuttle.) Our lives have become more and more distant from direct physical participation, not least through the massive increase in proxy-participation, as in looking at physical environments from a detached distance, on television and computer screens. A lot of life is spent in cars. We also avoid death and very few people have witnessed people

dying, especially compared with our forebears; and when most people die in our culture the bodies are taken away and don't sit in honour in the house as in many other cultures they do. Getting into an ever faster and more virtual, automated, physically safer and more sanitised world involves further distancing and separating from direct touch, smelling, handling, lifting, stretching, and moving across distances. We can travel to Australia in the sitting position.

In the way I am talking of embodying as a shorthand summary for many different facets of physicality put together, I am riding roughshod over many subtle distinctions; what is meant by embodying is an enormous topic. My aim is to expand on the idea of the knowing body, showing that the more knowing we are “as *bodies*”, the more we enhance human wellbeing, our emotional intelligence, and our capacity to live in the contemporary world. In approaching this in more detail I want to come back to the five abilities, and I shall briefly review the other four, showing how embodying supports each of them. (Remember that I said that each of the abilities supports and is necessary for the others.)

I shall begin with self-recognising. I suggest that if we are knowing bodies, and more deeply aware of our physical, sensory, and feeling experience, this helps us with more refined self-regulation. Self-recognising includes attending closely to our participation in the world, for instance, noticing fluctuations in interest and energy, finding out what we are drawn towards and what we withdraw from. We can also begin to recognise departures from congruence, sometimes as they are happening. We can notice that when we hear what passes for some terrible news, for instance, that there may be some gladness or relief mixed in with the sadness or fear. If we encounter times of extreme anxiety, and can recognise – that is take note of, or register – the fear reactions, we have more choice about what happens next – perhaps to stay with the feelings and breathe slowly and deeply, or to remember a wider picture that is more reassuring (such as realising that while one's house has dropped by £100,000 in value, so have other houses too.) In short, the more self-recognising or attuned that we are, the more we may be able to manage our emotional ups and downs. In other words, by being more embodied we can support a more sophisticated and detailed stress-proofing, so that we can register what's happening to us, whether it's a good thing that's happening or a bad thing, and not to be blown away by the bad. If you like it's

building a more rigorous bio-feedback system, supporting resilience and increasing self-support.

An embodied base for self-recognising also assists in knowing our bodies and physical processes. We can attend more precisely to our state of health and wellbeing. The more embodied we are, the more we can be attuned to our body sense and feeling states. Arguably, it entails a complete reorientation and rethinking of what is talked about as “self-care”.

Interestingly, a therapist known to me – a wonderful woman, very sensitive, very knowledgeable – registered some sense that all was not right in her ovaries. She went to her doctor who advised her that she had no need to worry, there were no clear symptoms of anything being wrong, and he sent her away with reassurance. About 18 months later she was back, this time with a swelling and pain. And after about another 18 months, and massive medical procedures, she was dead from ovarian cancer. You can make all the connections that I make to this story; I don't need to spell them out. Doctors' dismissals of patients' reporting their physical states can be (as it was here) a serious impediment to health maintenance. However, the amount of desensitizing and also of hyper-reactivity, have probably made physicians less attentive to patient's self-reports. (In fact, I think the medical profession is waking up to need for more attention to be paid to patients' input. I think there's a real shift happening, part of a great turnover of ideas and understanding about doctor-patient relations. Certainly we need to support this trend.)

I'm going to move to another of the abilities – responding. And here I want to suggest that being embodied supports our being more “situationally empathic”, that is, attuned and sensitive to the present circumstances that we are in. Responding refers to how we organise our experience in the light of specific features of the environment. Our body provides us with a source of information or knowledge about our world and our place in it, but often this is a kind of knowledge that, from the dominant point of view, has little validity. However, a heightened sensitivity to what we feel and sense can trigger many different responses.

I came across an example in Andy Fisher's book⁷ about eco-psychology in which he describes how he had a “compelling love affair with all things rocky” when he was young. As a kid he would

sit for hours near some cliffs, sandy beaches, stones, rocky outcroppings. Later in life he became a student geologist. And he had to undertake a project that involved taking a rock and putting it into a servo control compression machine to measure its strength by squeezing it to breaking point. He reports, "As I watched that rock crumble I felt a voice inside me scream. Yet the mood of the laboratory overrode it. It was not until some time later that I let myself feel the shame for what I had done." (p. 55) Fisher's response included feeling powerless to act and ashamed afterwards that he had not done something else. Responses are usually multidimensional and widely at variance between people. Perhaps most people wouldn't feel shame, as Fisher did. Many might even enjoy the act of destruction. Fisher was highly sensitised to the rock, he was also sensitised to his own feelings.

In considering the connection between bodily felt experience and field sensitivity, I have been much influenced by some recent writing by Rob Farrands, who quotes in a paper⁸ the very first sentence of Merleau-Ponty's article "Eye and Mind"⁹. This reads: "Science manipulates things and gives up dwelling in them". Farrands goes on: "To know the world through concepts means a withdrawal from the world – to give up 'dwelling in' the world so that we might conceptualise and think about it" (p.3). This reminds us of the dualistic separation of forming concepts from other aspects of experiencing that we traced to Descartes' continuing influence. The abstract level takes us away from the direct embodied experience.

One of the things about a very disembodied culture is that something like intuition gets entirely discounted. Yet we can develop extraordinary levels of sensitivity to our surroundings (sometimes we do naturally), that seem to support, perhaps even to explain, the phenomenon of intuition. If we take seriously the notion that our body provides us with an incredible amount of information and data, perhaps certain kinds of intuition are not so surprising. An example of this appears in a book by Gavin de Becker¹⁰ which is about fear. As part of his study, he interviewed a lot of people who had been subjected to rape, not by complete strangers, but by people who had befriended them – it was mostly women that he interviewed. And in each case the women reported having registered at some bodily, felt level, a measure of disquiet at a point ahead of the rape. They had the warning signals but in each case (it appeared) they talked themselves out of attending to

their felt reservations. Again, I wonder if that is not surprising, given that our entire educational system, medicine, and teachings of modern science comprehensively rubbish the idea that intuition even *exists*, and that attending to feeling states as a legitimate source of data about the world is a nonsense. Personally, I consider that we may have the capacity potentially to operate as a highly sensitive instrument, somewhat like a Geiger counter picking up invisible dangers, such as the presence of intruders. I'm quite sure there will be people here, many of us, who have experienced knowing something, at the same time as not knowing how we know it.

This kind of highly sensitive response is an extreme example of what I am calling situational empathy. There are many less dramatic varieties, but no less important, in a world where difficult situations and collaborations may be necessary for human survival. Take, for instance, a critical task in an important meeting. The capacity to take in what is happening in the meeting can be very useful, and the skill can be cultivated. Those of us who run groups know that with practice we can become finely tuned to what's happening at some kind of collective level which is very difficult to define and pin down, but provides (for instance) a sense of the "right moment" when the group or committee will be ready to hear something.

Farrands gives a fine example¹¹: he was working as an organisational consultant with a high level management team in the oil extraction industry in the North Sea. There had been a serious incident in which some men had died, having been caught down some tube trying to rescue another worker. And the team were talking about it as a management issue, complete with techno-rational jargon. And Rob Farrands was sitting there – hearing the issue addressed as some sort of technical procedure that had gone wrong – and feeling himself in some state of shock, which he registered in his bodily felt sense. His question was how to make bridges between his felt sense, the atmosphere in the room, and the content of what they were talking about, which was leached of all feeling. How could he draw upon his embodied feeling of shock to inform what was happening? In my view, he acted in a very skilful way. He waited for the exact moment – and then interrupted: "I don't know whether we're missing something here because we're not talking, I notice, about the bravery of these men". What I think is impressive here is that he found a way to

shift this group of managers from their exclusive attention to what had gone wrong at the level of technical safety issues, into a much more real, vibrant, and ultimately more useful and satisfying conversation. The team members were clearly affected but of course – given that being embodied beings with feelings and emotional reactions is usually excluded from the management milieu in large organisational environments – there was no way that they were going to acknowledge these. Farrands found an emotional entry point for that group of people – all men – where they would be able to register “bravery”, which they did. And having started, they were then able to discuss the whole incident with more self-disclosure of their personal reactions. Being able to find those quintessential moments when you have an opportunity to shift the direction of things going on around you is part of what I am talking about with situational empathy, responding to a situation and using bodily feelings as part of the relevant “data”.

Extrapolating to the world situation as it is likely to unfold, our individual responses become part of the shared experience of our communities and organisations. What we encounter may be pretty scary, it may be very demanding, it may challenge us considerably, but if we honour our capacity – each of us – to have influence, to trust ourselves to be able to tune into what is happening in the actual circumstances we face, we can act with more complete information, a wider span of knowing. The idea of “coming back into the body”, of attending to our feeling states not just egotistically, but as data about the contexts we share, well, that’s a contribution we can make. More well-informed, intelligent, and appropriate responses rely on “whole-person reactions”, not just to free-floating ideas and conceptual thoughts.

Since I am now short of time, I shall make brief mention only of how embodying as an ability also supports interrelating with others. When we talk about attunement as it relates to dialogue and contact, or about empathy, or about projective identification – all of these involve a bodily element. Dialogue is not just talking: it is not just the words; it’s two presences together. I was inspired, reading an article by Denise Tervo¹² in the last issue of the *British Gestalt Journal*, who writes about her work as a child and family therapist: “My *embodied presence* emerges from my awareness and intention to be in my body, to relate to myself and others, and to be present in the room. I am intentional with my physicality in relation to an other, to feeling my body, (to being aware of my

senses, my breathing, and my movement), and to how I place myself in proximity to the child and family...through my energy, empathy, listening, language, and movement, I respond to the child and the family ‘body to body’” (*italics in original*).

And, finally, I want to talk about experimenting and how embodying supports that, just as we have seen it supporting self-recognising, responding, and interrelating. To remind you, experimenting is to do with our encountering the new, dealing with unforeseen events, extending ourselves into the unknown, and living with the unpredictable. Experimenting is about finding within us the confidence and capacity to stay open to the new, being prepared to do things differently rather than remain habituated to what has always happened before; it counters our tendencies to live in the future – anticipating and expecting what is going to happen – and supports us instead to live in the present, recognising the creative opportunities we always have. We are, of course, deeply patterned and we operate automatically in vast areas of our lives. It’s inevitable that we do. This knowing, embodied understanding, in that it is engrained in our physicality, in our bloodstream or in our bones, and not just as a figure of speech, is often taken so much for granted that a lot of it is out of our awareness. The ability to experiment refers to the possibility of revising what we know; learning to act differently, which always involves some physical adjustment or adaptation as part of that shift. There is a revision or an invention – and without that awareness moment, that coming fully into the present, our automatic and conservative (with a small c) usual patterns would unfold as per normal. Stopping ourselves from falling back into habitual patterns is critical in remaining a learner, staying young in heart, and able to adapt to the new. It’s about our being willing to take the risk of being fully alive.

Embodying, therefore, is central in our acting in the world, and I have suggested several ways in which being deeply grounded in our bodily experience can enable us to be more knowing as people with bodily substance, as living parts of the planet, adjusting to our physical existence, and drawing on all of our experience, not just our capacity to reason, imagine, think and talk. In reflecting on the themes of this lecture, our capacity to take part in the global adventure with which we are confronted, can be – indeed, has to be – grounded in more than ideas and fancy models. The embodied return is a necessary step at this point in history.

This brings me to some words from Morris Berman¹³ with which I want to conclude my talk today. Berman points out that even a “tiny (non heroic) act” can open the door to “going out to the world in a spirit of aliveness and curiosity rather than one of need and desperation” or fear. And this act of going out into the world, as a body meeting world, *is* heroic, not in some grand or visionary sense of the word, “but in the sense of something at once necessary and private and extremely difficult, because it requires doing the one thing that we seek to avoid at all costs: we are asked finally to put our entire bodies into a situation; to refuse numbness and protection in favour of risk and immediacy. That is the ultimate meaning of human life on this planet, the hidden history which, down through the ages, the human race has struggled with, and the destiny and choice which now, after all these millennia, stares us uncompromisingly in the face” (p. 318).

I could not put it better. Thank you.

¹ Ballard, D. (2006) *Working with human change for environmental sustainability*. Ph D Thesis, University of Bath

² Wollants, G. (2008) *Gestalt Therapy: Therapy of the situation*. Turnhout: Faculteit voor mens en samenleving of course.

³ Owen, D. (2007) *The Hubris Syndrome: Bush, Blair and the intoxication of power*. London: Methuen

⁴ Spretnak, C. (1997) *The Resurgence of the Real: Body, nature, and place in a hypermodern world*. Reading, Mass.:Addison-Wesley

⁵ Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. (1999) *Philosophy in the Flesh: The embodied mind and its challenge to Western thought*. New York: Basic Books

⁶ See, for instance, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1962) *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. C.Smith, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

⁷ See Fisher, A. (2002) *Radical Ecopsychology: Psychology in the service of life*. Albany, NY: SUNY press.

⁸ Farrands, R. (2008) Searching for the middle way in action inquiry. (Unpublished paper).

⁹ Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964) Eye and Mind, in Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*. Chicago: North Western University Press.

¹⁰ De Becker, G.(1997) *The Gift of Fear*. London: Bloomsbury

¹¹ From the paper cited in note #8 .

¹² Tervo, D. (2007) Zig zag flop and roll: Creating an embodied field for healing and awareness when working with children. *British Gestalt Journal*, 16,2. 28-37.

¹³ Berman, M. (1990) *Coming to Our Senses: Body and spirit in the hidden history of the West*. New York: Simon and Schuster