

THE NOW —

The Times of Meaning in Gestalt Therapy

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Abstract: This paper is based on a keynote lecture that was given at the biannual conference of the *Gestaltterapeutisk Forum* in Copenhagen on March 26, 2011. Therefore it includes some special references to Denmark and Søren Kierkegaard. The title of the conference was “The Now: The Meaning of Time in Gestalt Therapy.” The author investigates the question, how the Now can be understood in ways that are in accordance with gestalt therapy’s roots in phenomenology, gestalt psychology, and holism. He points out that temporality and meaning-making are closely linked together, which leads to the idea that there is no absolute Now. Instead it is proposed that the duration of a respective Now should be defined with respect to the complexity of the meaning that is to be created. A holarchy of Nows is proposed, in which “individual sensory Nows,” an “integrated sensory Now,” a “semantic Now,” a “situational Now,” and a “hermeneutic Now” are inherently interrelated.

Key words: gestalt psychology; holism; meaning; now; phenomenology; time.

The topic of time has always fascinated me, both inside and outside the context of psychotherapy (see Staemmler 1987; 1997; 2002; 2009). In modern physics, for example, relativity theory and quantum mechanics have revealed mind-blowing perspectives on time, that have radically changed mankind’s world view.

In psychotherapy, time in general, and the present moment in particular, have always played an important role both theoretically and in practice — no matter which school you consider: The Freudians were convinced of the significance of a person’s past, as it shows in the presence of the transference relationship. The classical behaviourists considered the power of contingency to be the most influential principle in psychology. And traditional gestalt therapists agreed with Perls’s statement that

Nothing exists except the here and now. The now is the present, is the phenomenon, is what you are aware of, is that moment in which you carry around your so-called memories and your so-called anticipations with you. Whether you remember or anticipate, you do it now. The past is no more. The future is not yet. (1969, 41 – original italics)

Although on first reading it may seem easy to agree with these statements, things around the topic of time tend to quickly become much more complex, once you examine them more closely.

The Mathematical Now

Let us explore the question, *What is the Now, what is the present moment?* If you want to keep things simple, you can take refuge in a purely intellectual or,

if you will, mathematical point of view. From this perspective, the Now is an extremely small fraction of a second; it is the minimal transition point, at which the past turns into the future; its duration is approximately zero.

However, this seemingly simple point of view can easily be questioned: Since a mathematical point is infinitely small, the Now virtually disappears and only past and future remain. Besides this logical reason there is also a psychological one, that speaks against the use of a mathematical definition of the Now: The minimal fraction of a second, a mathematician can *conceive of*, is far below the threshold of what humans can *experience*. That is, a mathematical Now is not accessible to human experience.

In sum, the mathematical definition, that promised to provide us with a simple answer, ultimately defines the Now away and does not make psychological sense. As Henri Bergson said,

No doubt there is an ideal present — a pure conception, the indivisible limit which separates past from future. But the real, concrete, live present — that of which I speak when I speak of my present perception — that present necessarily occupies a duration. (1912/2004, 176)

We have to acknowledge that the present, as it occurs to us in our real lives, always has an *extension* or, as Bergson called it, a “duration.”

The Sensory Nows

So maybe we should take a look at *psychological* research. The psychologists have used several approaches to define the Now. Generally, their point of departure is the investigation of perception, our primary embodied way of relating to the world (see Merleau-Ponty 1962). In one experiment, people listened to two simple sounds — “clicks” — the second one following very quickly after the first. The idea was this: If the interval between the two sounds was so small, that people perceived them as only *one* sound, one might conclude that they were perceived within the respective Now. In contrast, if the interval was a little longer so that people began to perceive the two subsequent clicks as *two distinct* sounds, then one might say that they took place in two subsequent Nows. In consequence, we could define the Now by the threshold of the human capacity to distinguish two events.

The result was pretty clear: Two auditory stimuli have to take place within two to four milliseconds to be perceived as one stimulus only. If the gap between them is longer, they are perceived as two separate stimuli. So in this case, the Now lasts for about three milliseconds.

In the psychological laboratory one can, of course, investigate the same question with respect to different senses. If, for instance, you replace the auditory clicks with two *tactile* stimuli, you will find, that they need to be at least ten milliseconds apart from each other to be experienced as two separate events. And if you take *visual* stimuli, you will see that the threshold of contemporaneity is about twenty milliseconds.

These empirical findings lead to the conclusion that there are different sensory Nows depending on the sense organ that you choose to investigate. For instance, the visual Now lasts about ten times longer than the auditory Now; ten moments of listening take the same time as one moment of looking.

In sum, this research leaves us with the puzzling insight, that there are various sensory Nows of various durations. Of an event that has both auditory and visual aspects, we would have to say that some of its auditory components are already in the past, while its visual components are still in the present.¹ Obviously, this is counter-intuitive and does not match our everyday experience.

This research cannot come up with a *unitary* understanding of the Now; it reflects one of the major problems of academic empirical psychology in that it is frequently fragmented rather than holistic. Phenomenally, human experience is not separated into a visual and an auditory Now; rather, it is an *integrated* experience that includes and transcends the individual sensory systems.

The Integrated Sensory Now: Three Seconds

Consequently, some researchers have tried to find out more about this integrative process. In one experiment they used a metronome. As you know, one can set it up to tick at a slower or a faster rhythm. If you have it tick relatively fast, people find it easy to form auditory clusters consisting of several ticks, for instance like in the three-four time rhythm of a waltz — hm-ta-ta. In other words, they are able to *integrate* three ticks into one larger whole.

Doing so means being able to keep in mind the first and the second tick as you hear the third tick. But what is more, you also *remember* the first set of three ticks, when the second set begins: You have a sense that the second set is a *repetition* of the first one. And as the second set gets near its end, you already

¹ Moreover, if measured in milliseconds, this kind of Now leaves us with a similar problem to the one we have faced with regard to the mathematical definition: Although interesting in the laboratory, this Now is much too short to be applied to everyday experience.

anticipate a third set to come up soon; in other words, you have at least a vague sense of the immediate future.

As Bergson observed, “however brief we suppose any perception to be, it always occupies a certain *duration*, and involves consequently an effort of *memory*.” “The psychological state, then, that I call ‘my present,’ must be both a perception of the immediate past and a determination of the immediate future” (1912/2004, 25, 177 — italics added). In his analysis of time consciousness, Husserl (1964) has called these overlaps from the past into the Now “retentions”; the reaching-out of the present into the future he named “protention.” As some other phenomenologists put it, every Now has its “history” and its “horizon.”

Frequently, the history and the horizon of a given moment are covering a much larger span of time than just a few seconds: I will give only two little examples:

(1) Imagine a surprise: You see something new, something you have never seen before. Even in a moment like that, the past is immediately involved. Without an implicit reference to your previous experience, you would not be surprised, because you would not be able to know, that what you see now is something you have not seen before. — The same is, of course, true for the things you already know. How would you know here and now that this is, for instance, a chair, had you not learned to recognize chairs on previous occasions?

(2) Imagine you have a controversial discussion with somebody. At a certain point in time they raise their arm, reaching back. You startle. Why is this? Well, your previous experience has provided you with an expectation about the behaviour that immediately follows such an action, so that you anticipate a strike.

If there were no such retentions and protentions, if there was only the immediate Now, we would be “imprisoned in the present,” as Erv Polster (1985) once said. In Gary Yontef’s words, we would be “close to brain damage” (Yontef 1993, 121). We would not have a sense of time at all, there would be no fear and no hope — a regrettable condition if it comes to mastering ordinary life. Without a history we would be absolute beginners in life at each and every moment. And without a horizon we would not be able to find our way to the airport or engage in any committed relationships or develop any projects and visions. The notions of “growth,” “process,” and “change,” that are essential for our understanding of therapy, would just not exist. More fundamentally, the idea of any kind of *movement* would make no

sense. Maybe even the word “life” would not have a meaning. Last but not least, as the renowned Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard (1961; 1999), famously argued, if there is no Before and no After, then ultimately there are also no ethics.

Re- and protentions of the sensory Now are the least and most basic phenomena that sum up to the more general phenomenon of *temporality*, which is pervasive in, and critical for, human existence, as Heidegger (1962) has extensively spelled out in his famous *Being and Time*. In the words of St. Augustine (1994), retentions are “the presence of the past,” and protentions are “the presence of the future.”

Let’s return to the metronome: The subjective forming of temporal perceptual wholes is only possible, as long as the rhythm of the metronome is not much slower than about forty beats per minute. That is, there must not be a gap of much more than one-and-a-half seconds between each beat. In other words, there have to be at least two beats within a period of three seconds. Only then is it possible to integrate the given number of sensory stimuli — in this case two — into one perceived whole — a gestalt. If the pulse is slower, you cannot make any connections and will perceive single beats only, each of them filling one respective window of three-seconds.

This fact has intuitively been used by composers and poets. For example, most phrases in songs do not last much longer than three or four seconds, and the same is true for the majority of poems. Here is an example of a poem, each line of which takes not much more than three seconds to read; it is called “Time Is,” and it was written by Henry Van Dyke:

Time Is
 Too Slow for those who Wait,
 Too Swift for those who Fear,
 Too Long for those who Grieve,
 Too Short for those who Rejoice;
 But for those who Love,
 Time is not.

As a matter of fact, there are many neuroscientific findings that point to a three-second-rhythm in many integrating processes in the human brain. One example is the speed at which you are able to reconfigure an ambiguous picture such as Necker’s cube (see Pöppel 1985).

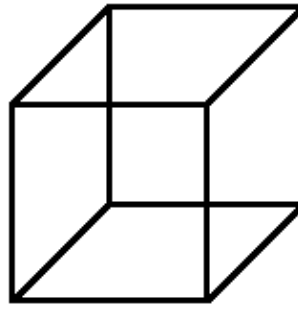


Figure 1: Necker cube

I imagine you are familiar with the two possible ways of seeing it. Please, take a minute to see each of them at least once, and now try and switch back and forth between the two manifestations of the cube *as quickly as possible!* — You will notice that, in spite of your best will and efforts, you cannot go faster than at a certain pace, which is exactly the three-seconds-rhythm.

Just for fun, try another little experiment: Watch the dice again and try *not* to have it turn into its other manifestation! — Did you realize, how long it took for the dice to change its appearance against your will? Yes, about three seconds again. — “If after about three seconds the brain does not receive new stimuli, it asks itself as it were: ‘Isn’t there any news?’ — and construes a new present moment” (Lublinski 2005).

On the basis of these investigations we might define the Now as the three seconds span of time it takes to integrate a given number of sensory stimuli and to form a perceptual whole. This is how the Now used to be understood: It is the Now that Perls thought of; at least I interpret his “continuum of awareness” as an exercise that asks clients to focus their attention on the kind of perceptual wholes that I have just described.² And it is also the Now Daniel Stern defines as “the present moment” (see Stern 2004).

The three seconds can also be understood as the duration of every single process of figure formation. Whenever three seconds have gone by, something else tends to come into the foreground. If you have ever tried to meditate, that is, if you have tried to focus your attention on a defined figure — such as your breath or a mantra or a spot on the wall — for a little longer than a few seconds, you know how hard it is to overcome this rhythm and not to get ‘distracted’ by some new figure. On the other hand, if you have practiced

² Sometimes in the transcripts of his therapy sessions you can also get the impression that he tried to focus his clients on the individual sensory Nows, for instance when he suggested that they describe what they hear, see, smell etc.

enough and have become able to stay with one figure for a longer period of time, you can have the sense of an expanding Now or, in other words, of time standing still. Some call it the “eternal now.” Therefore Kierkegaard said that “the moment is that ambiguity in which time and eternity touch each other” (1980, 89).

In ordinary life, the three-seconds-rhythm is of great social significance, since it is a universal prerequisite for human communication. It is this rhythm, by which we attune to, and coordinate ourselves with, each other in conversations and other social contacts, for example in dancing. Since we are all ticking with the same pulse, we are able to join in with other people’s activities. This rhythm has a unifying and participatory impact on human life. It is the temporal basis for our intersubjective engagement with other people and the world in general.

With the step from the fragmented sensory Nows to the integrated sensory Now we have not only entered the realm of gestalt formation on a perceptual level, we have also entered the realm of meaning-making in a more general sense of the word: The forming of gestalts such as the three-beats-rhythm of a waltz is already an act of meaning-making, although still on a pretty rudimentary level. Already with the integrated sensory Now the processes, that are called “top-down” in cognitive psychology, start to become effective; the “bottom-up” processes of immediate sensory perception do not prevail anymore.

In Gestalt psychology terms, the whole that is larger than, and different from, the sum of its parts, acquires a character of its own, that has an impact on the way its parts are perceived. More precisely, “we ‘see’ about 10% of what we think we see — 90% is a ‘construction’ from what we just saw, from what we remember seeing in similar situations” (Nadel 2010), and from what we expect to see.

Apparently, *temporality and meaning-making come into being together*, once we enter the integrated sensory Now. Hence it is no surprise, that Heidegger (1962) saw them as most important and fundamental dimensions of the human condition. — Although this is only the beginning of temporality and meaning-making, as I shall demonstrate in what follows, we should keep in mind from now on, that there is a close connection between the two.

The Semantic Now

If you think of the poem I presented to you earlier, you will remember that it consisted of several lines of about three seconds each. Each line forms a

basic unit of the poem, that has its own meaning. But all of them together form a larger meaningful whole that conveys the entire message of the poem. To understand this overall message, you must not confine yourself to the three-seconds-Now: You need a more inclusive Now, because you have to *connect* the individual lines in your mind and *remember* their respective contents. Thereby you can form an understanding of the *whole* poem, after you have read all the lines.

You can only achieve this, if you activate your *short-term memory*. That is the kind of memory, by the use of which you hold all information that you pick up within a maximum period of one minute. It makes it possible for you to integrate the *semantic* contents of the respective integrative sensory Nows. Hence, I would like to call this the “semantic Now.”

This semantic Now allows you to create *immediate contexts*. You can link the individual meanings, that you have created step by step every three seconds, with each other and add them up to a larger semantic structure. As a result, you have integrated them into one inclusive meaningful whole, i.e. the meaning of the poem.

The same is, of course, true for any sequence of perceptual events in ordinary life, most importantly for any communication. But it applies also to pieces of music, for instance. Without integrating the single phrases, that last about three seconds each, you would never hear a melody. Husserl has described it this way:

The tone-now . . . continuously changes . . . into something that has been, an always new tone-now continuously relieves the one that has passed over into modification. But when the consciousness of the tone-now, the primal impression, passes over into retention, this retention itself is a now in turn, something actually existing. While it is actually present itself (but not an actually present tone), it is retention *of* the tone that has been. (1964, 30f. — original italics)

Some Insights

At this point I would like to alert you to three insights that are contained in what I have written so far. The common denominator of these insights is, that there is *no absolute Now*, when it comes to human experience of time. This general insight has three aspects:

(1) As I have explicitly stated before in Bergson’s words: Any understanding of the present, that refers to the human *experience* of the Now, has a *duration* that begins in the past, includes the present, and reaches out seamlessly into the future. So the experiential Now takes time to emerge, to

blossom, and to disappear, i.e. besides perception it involves memory and anticipation: „A basic belief of Gestalt therapy is that the present encompasses the past and helps influence the future“ (Melnick et al. 2005, pp. 104f.).

(2) What has remained more or less implicit before is the fact, that the experience of time does not take place in and of itself. It is inherently bound together with some kind of *activity*. Generally speaking, the phenomenologists call this activity “intentionality.” It means any kind of being conscious of something; it may be attending to something by listening or looking or, of course, any more complex action such as singing a song, reading a poem or driving a car. Time is related to intentionality; it becomes real only through the pursuit of activity.³ As Merleau-Ponty writes, “time arises from my relation to things” (1962, 412).

(3) Temporality and meaning-making are interconnected dimensions of the human condition. And that has a very precise consequence: Depending on the complexity of the phenomenon that I try to understand, I need to elect a different kind of Now, and that is exactly that respective Now, which allows for the forming of the appropriate whole and its meaning. — Remember my examples: If I only want to perceive a single sound, a different kind of Now is suitable than if I want to understand one line of a poem; yet another Now is fitting if I want to comprehend the entire poem. As you can read in the Bible, “to everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven“ (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

In sum: The more complex the whole at stake, the more extended the appropriate Now has to be. You can also reverse this: If you want to create more complex meanings, you need to apply a Now of greater duration. — I would therefore like to make a basic suggestion: Instead of arbitrarily defining the Now by the use of a clock and measuring it formally in terms of seconds or minutes, we should assume a pragmatic (in the sense of Peirce, James, Mead and Dewey) and experiential position and *define the Now flexibly in relation to the respective object of meaning-making*.

³ The concept of activity has played an important role in Russian psychology (see Wertsch 1981).

The Situational Now

The Now I just described was the semantic Now, which involves the activation of short-term memory. But as the term already suggests, our short-term memory only has a limited capacity; it can only hold a maximum of about seven semantic items (Miller 1956) for a time span of thirty to maybe sixty seconds. So our short-term memory may suffice to understand a poem such as the one by van Dyke presented earlier. But if a poem — or any other subject-matter — goes on for longer than one minute, or if you want to remember the poem's message tomorrow, then you have to rely on additional memory capacities: You need a long-term memory.

For example, think of your situation as you are reading this paper. It is obvious that if you want to follow my train of thought over the period of time it takes to finish reading it, then you need to practice the activity of remembering, connecting and integrating that I mentioned earlier. But in this case you need to practice it, as it were, on a higher level too: You must remember the numerous semantic Nows, connect the first one to the second one and to the third one and so on . . . until you reach the end of the article. By the time you reach the end, you will have formed an even more complex whole of meaning, which I call the "situational Now."

Connecting the various semantic Nows and integrating them into a situational Now is, however, a *sequential* process only in the sense that you can integrate the next semantic item only after you have experienced it. But there are also *recursive* and *feed-forward* processes going on, since as you read this paper sentence by sentence you are also already forming a more or less vague idea of its whole meaning. This idea as well as your expectations about the next steps, have an influence on the way in which you perceive and interpret the individual semantic Nows as they come up.

We can think of the entire process as an interpretative circle that goes back and forth between the whole and its parts. And that is true on *all* levels. For instance, it also applies to the understanding of the whole of a semantic Now and the integrated sensory Nows that form its parts.

As field theory (Lewin 1951) has demonstrated convincingly, the situational Now is a pretty complex phenomenon. It not only includes the meaning of this article, but also the larger context in which you are reading it. The weather outside, the room where you are sitting, your motivation for reading, your previous thoughts about time etc. — all of these dimensions and many more have an influence on how you experience this situation and how you make sense of it.

From a phenomenological point of view, this is the kind of whole that is most frequently experienced as the actual Now: The meaning of the given situation provides us with the necessary orientation in our everyday lives. Apart from restrictive conditions such as the ones psychological researchers tend to establish in their laboratories, we usually do not only attend and respond to isolated sensory stimuli or to three-seconds units of time, but to more encompassing contexts and wholes. At the same time we need to reduce life's complexity and subdivide it into manageable portions. As a German phenomenologist said,

where human existence primarily finds itself, is the situation. To what it responds, is the situation. With what it is confronted, is the given situation. Whatever is to be encountered, is encountered in a situation. Whatever is to be done, is done out of a situation and with regard to further situations. . . . Human existence is its situation. The situation is the *basic form of Dasein*. (Rombach 1987, 138f. — original italics)

Simply speaking: *Life comes in chunks* that we call "situations." Some of them are pretty clear-cut, some of them have fluid, messy or fuzzy edges. Some situations last for one or two minutes only, for instance when you interrupt your reading to make a phone call. When you return a few minutes later, you immerse yourself in the reading situation again, and this may take about an hour. When you are finished reading the paper, a new situation will come into being; maybe you decide to go for a walk, the duration of which may be thirty minutes. The situation I was in when I drafted this article, included three or four days at my laptop computer on the terrace of a holiday home in Sri Lanka — of course, interrupted by a few other situations of one or two hours such as having a walk, going out for dinner, having conversations with my wife, etc.

Hermann Schmitz, who identifies himself as a „new“ phenomenologist, states: „Situations exist everywhere and in multiple forms; they are virtually the *basic items* of our life experience“ (2005, 22 — italics added); and Martin Buber adds: „Not things, but situations are primary“ (1999, 153).

These „basic items“ are what might also be called „*the world within actual reach*“ (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, 37 — original italics). They are the type of wholes that we primarily experience in life. Of course, we can attend to the smaller wholes that are included in each situation, for instance the semantic Nows. But these smaller Nows present themselves to us *in the light of the given situation*: “It is this global presence of the situation which gives a meaning to the partial stimuli and causes them to acquire importance, value or existence

for the organism” Merleau-Ponty (1962, 79). The stimuli and the things are sub-wholes or, to use Arthur Koestler’s (1967; 1978) term: They are “holons” of a lower order. (For those who are not familiar with the term “holon”, a holon is a component of a hierarchy of wholes. It is both part of a larger whole and at the same time a whole in itself, that consists of certain parts.)

It may be unnecessary to mention that situations are typically *social* situations, in which we are in some way related to other people. Even when we are on our own, many lonely situations are what they are just because of the *absence of other people* — which, of course, is also a form of relatedness. Heidegger described “Being-with” as

an existential characteristic of Dasein even when factually no Other is present-at-hand or perceived. Even Dasein’s Being-alone is Being-with in the world. The Other can *be missing* only *in* and *for* a Being-with. Being-alone is a deficient mode of Being-with; its very possibility is the proof of this. (1962, pp. 156f. — original italics)

By the way, only a few years ago, some social neuroscientists came to a similar conclusion. They found that

thinking about social relationships is apparently part of the brain’s default state circuitry; it may continuously, often without effort or intention, assess and analyze past, present, or possible future social relationships whenever nonsocial tasks do not demand full attention. (Iacononi et al. 2004, 1171)

Whenever there is nothing more urgent to attend to, we spend our time dealing with the relationships that matter to us in one way or another.

Critical Situations

So I think it is safe to say that „the life of a person is a single uninterrupted chain of situations, through which she has to find her way“ (Hartmann 1949, 133), and that these situations usually include some kind of social context. Many of them are routine and easy to deal with, of course, but some of them stand out in one way or another. What Martin Buber has said about situations in general, is especially true for *extraordinary* situations:

In spite of all similarities, every living situation has, like a newborn child, a new face that has never been before and will never come again. It demands of you a reaction, which cannot be prepared beforehand. It demands nothing of what is past. It demands presence, responsibility; it demands *you*. (Buber 2002, 135 — italics added)

Among the critical situations are not only those, in which we find our life or that of significant others being threatened. Also critical are those situations, that pose “serious questions” (Böhme 1997), because they confront us with

difficult ethical problems. These questions are serious in the sense that “the way we answer them determines, which kind of person we are” (ibid., 157). Since, as Charles Taylor has pointed out,

to know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary. (Taylor 1992, 28)

Although every life situation has its ethical dimension, in the situations that I call “critical,” this dimension comes into the foreground most saliently. Think, for instance, of the demanding questions about abortion that many women have to deal with, when they have become pregnant unwillingly. The partially fierce debates that go on between the supporters of the “Pro Choice” and the anti-abortion movements can be interpreted as the political parallel of the agonizing personal conflict, that some women are engaged in, when they consider an abortion.

As another example you may remember the news about the man who was sitting on a bus that was about to take him and many other passengers from the airport terminal to an airplane, when he saw somebody throw a hand grenade into the aisle. He immediately grasped the entire situation and realized that many passengers were about to be seriously injured or even killed. He quickly threw himself over the bomb to reduce its impact on the other passengers. A second later he died, but nobody else was significantly wounded.

This example reminds me of another type of critical situation, which the ancient Greeks used to call “*kairos*.” With this term they tried to describe a kind of situation that offers a golden opportunity, a unique constellation, in which you must quickly grasp your chance and can make a decision of great fortune.

Kairos is the decisive situation that one has to recognize as such and that one must not let pass by without taking action. As Nietzsche said:

He who cannot sink down on the threshold of the moment and forget all the past, who cannot stand balanced like a goddess of victory without growing dizzy and afraid, will never know what happiness is — worse, he will never do anything to make others happy. (Nietzsche 1997, 62)

In our therapeutic work, *kairos* situations are not always heroic or dramatic, although I can recall instances, in which one ‘right’ intervention changed the course of therapy decisively. However, in the therapeutic context I think of *kairos* more in terms of *tact* and *timing*.

Interestingly, very little has been published about these aspects of our work, although so much can depend on them. Finding the right situation to confront your client with some unpleasant or even painful aspect of herself is often crucial to the way in which your intervention is experienced. Equally, it can also be of great importance to know when the situation does *not* have this *kairos* quality and when it is wiser to keep quiet, so that you do not hurt the other person unnecessarily and risk their trust.

The great hermeneutic philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer has wonderfully described that to say something tactfully

will always mean that one passes over something tactfully and leaves it unsaid, and it is tactless to express what one can only pass over. But to pass over something does not mean to avert one's gaze from it, but to keep an eye on it in such a way that rather than knock into it, one slips by it. Thus tact helps one to preserve distance. It avoids the offensive, the intrusive, the violation of the intimate sphere of the person. (1989, 16)

Again, “to everything there is a season . . .”, and situations cannot be controlled. Although you can contribute to their formation to a certain degree, there is also always an air of being “thrown” into them, as the existentialists say. Once you “find” yourself in a certain situation, you cannot escape it anymore. You have to find your way *through* it. You *must* respond. Trying not to respond is a response too.

The Hermeneutic Now

In that sense situations are pretty representative of life in general: You are born into it, you grow up, you age, and you die — all of which you cannot avoid. But you can choose, how to respond to these facts and, thereby, make it *your* life and lend *your meaning* to it. From one situation to the next, you influence the course of your life by responding to the given situation on the basis of who you have come to be in the past, and with an idea about how you wish your life and that of other sentient beings to be like in the future.

From day to day and from year to year, you assemble these situations and choices; you may integrate a certain number of them into intermediate wholes — childhood, adolescence etc. — called “life phases.” And in an even more encompassing perspective you compose the largest experiential whole, that you then call “my life.” As Husserl observed, “the ego constitutes himself for himself in . . . the unity of a ‘history’” (2008, 75) and, as I would like to add, in the vision of a future. To be sure, this is a narrative and *hermeneutic* process, which Erving Polster (1987) wrote about in his well known book *Every Person's Life is Worth a Novel*.

Therefore I would like to define the time frame, that allows for the creation of this largest whole of meaning, the “hermeneutic Now.” It is the kind of Now that we inhabit, when we are looking for answers to questions such as, “What is the meaning of *my* life?” or “What is the meaning of life in general?”

I am aware that it goes against the conventional use of the term “now” to associate it with periods of years or even decades. So in our conversations with our clients we better apply it only to situations or smaller time spans. But from both a systematic and an experiential point of view, I find it important not to exclude the highest complexity of meaning-making from what we consider as present.

Fundamental questions about the meaning of life cannot be answered on the basis of the sensory, semantic and situational Nows alone, because the answers presuppose an awareness of *mortality* — an awareness that most people in our culture do not develop fully before the age of thirty or even forty years. Apparently a large portion of our lifetime must have passed, before we understand that “we are dying daily, . . . for daily some part of life is taken from us” (Seneca 1932, 84). But the meaning of life can only be found, if one of its most important characteristics, its certain end, is taken into account.

Moreover, the awareness of life’s impermanence and finiteness, the experienced knowledge that your lifetime will end as well as mine, forms the ultimate connection between temporality and historicity on the one hand, and the embodied nature of our existence on the other hand. Being a body invariably includes being born, growing up, being ill and injured from time to time, recovering again, getting old and frail, and finally dying. The body carries the traces of its past and the chances for its future; it has its history and its horizon. “Embodiment is a temporal gestalt” (Marcel 1985, 63).

The course of our embodied life from birth to death confronts each of us with the continuing task to make sense of it. In his *The Sickness Unto Death*, Søren Kierkegaard (1941) offers one of many possible interpretations: He sees despair as an essential dimension of the meaning that many people attribute to life in the face of death; in his view, however, despair is a sin that can only be overcome by the hope which Christianity has to offer.

Of course, whether you are Danish or not, you do not have to agree with that. There are many other possible ways of making sense of one’s life; and in most cases a person comes up with different meanings at different times in their life. The hermeneutics of life take place throughout life; the hermeneutic Now covers the entire life-span.

Conclusion

Let me begin to sum up by quoting Husserl again: For him, time is not only something that belongs in a general way to every single experience, but [is] *a necessary form binding experiences with experiences*. Every real experience . . . is necessary one that endures; and with this duration it takes its place within an endless continuum of durations. . . . And that at once tells us that it belongs to *one* endless “stream of experience.” (Husserl 1962, 217 — original italics)

As I have tried to demonstrate, depending on the respective complexity of meaning that is at stake, the Now must be defined in different ways referring to different durations. The shorter Nows make it possible to give meaning to smaller wholes; the longer Nows allow for more complex meaning-making, because they consist of a number of smaller Nows — *plus* the additional meaning that emerges from the formation of the respective larger whole. (You remember: The whole is *larger than, and different from*, the sum of its parts.)

As you can see in *Figure 2* below, I do not use Koestler’s illustration of a holarchy, which looks like a family tree or a depiction of a military hierarchy of power. I rather illustrate my idea with a picture of concentric circles to make clear that each level always exists; in Daniel Stern’s words, “experiences in the present can be polyphonic or polytemporal” (Stern 2004, 25). Moreover, any respective larger circle encompasses and, thereby, informs the respective smaller ones. And, *vice versa*, the smaller units of meaning together give rise to the larger ones. It is a hermeneutic circle, about which Gadamer wrote with regard to texts; but his characterization can also be applied to the holarchy of Nows:

A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. He projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again, the initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. Working out this fore-projection, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there. (Gadamer 1989, 267)

So the idea of the Now that I propose, is a hermeneutic modification of Koestler’s notion of a holarchy (see Koestler 1978, ch. 1): I think of a hierarchy of Nows, which are interrelated in the form of various recursive and feed-forward processes across different levels. These levels differ with respect to the complexity of meaning they can create. Each level is both holistic in kind and — except for the largest one — itself part of a larger whole.

The levels of complexity mutually impact each other. They begin with the individual *Sensory Nows* that can be integrated into an *Integrated Sensory Now*.

A number of *Integrated Sensory Nows* make it possible for a *Semantic Now* to emerge, and many *Semantic Nows* together form a *Situational Now*. Finally, the various *Situational Nows* can be integrated into one *Hermeneutic Now*, which enables us to give meaning to our lives. And *vice versa*: The meaning we give to our lives informs the way we experience situations and so on down to the various levels of increasingly smaller complexity.

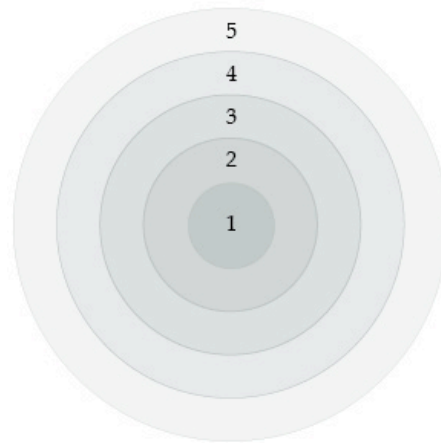


Figure 2: *A Hierarchy of Nows*

Legend:

	Kind of Now	Duration
1	Individual Sensory Nows	< 20 ms
2	Integrated Sensory Now	~ 3 sec
3	Semantic Now	< 1 min
4	Situational Now	1 min – some hours or days
5	Hermeneutic Now	life phases – life span

Certainly, this is not the traditional way we used to think about the *Now* in gestalt therapy. However, I think it is in accordance with gestalt therapy's roots in phenomenology, gestalt psychology, and holism. Moreover, I hope that this new view of the *Now* will be more effective than traditional notions of the *Now* and support gestalt therapists to work with their clients in integrated and differentiated ways.

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