

# Gestalt's Paradoxical Theory of Change

*To become who we can be, we must first become who we are*

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One of the great paradoxes of the hero's journey is that often, before we can begin our journey into the world, we must first journey into ourselves. The journey process is about transformation, about shedding old ways of thinking and acting so that we can be the person we have become. Ironically, the first stage of that journey takes us not outward, but inward, into our identity.

There we will discover that the masks, roles and other defenses that we created to protect our egos in the past are now preventing us from embracing our future. In fact, these defenses have begun to choke us, trapping us in an obsolete identity, often formed in childhood, and making change impossible. Simply put, before we can become what we can or want to become, we must first discard these defenses and become who we really are.

This irony—that before we can become, we must be—is best expressed by Gestalt therapy's "paradoxical theory of change," a concept first articulated by Albert Beisser, M.D., of the Gestalt Therapy Institute of Los Angeles. According to Beisser,

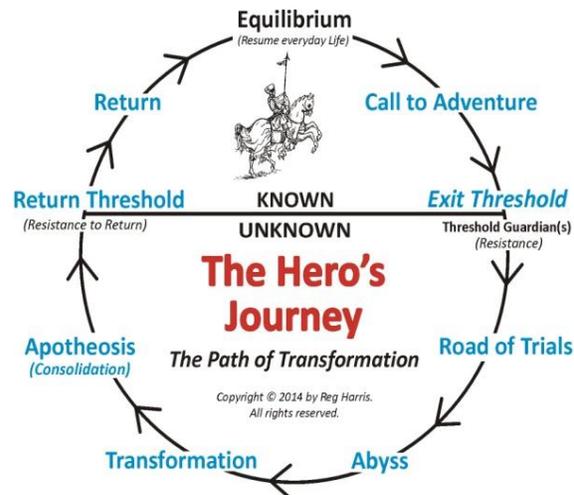
change occurs when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not. Change does not take place through a coercive attempt by the individual or by another person to change him, but it does take place if one takes the time and effort to be what he is—to be fully invested in his current positions. By rejecting the role of change agent, we make meaningful and orderly change possible (Beisser, 1970).

In other words, before we change, we must first be where and what we are. Gestalt theory holds that change cannot be forced. It happens naturally, when it is ripe to happen. However, change must begin from the life as it is, not from the illusions we create to make life appear as we would like it to be.

We must be fully engaged in the reality of our present to be able to step into our future. Gestalt therapist Maria Kirchner writes,

Only by being what and who one is can one become something or someone else. Effort, self-control, or avoidance focused exclusively on the future will not bring about change. We must become our truth (ourselves) first before we can move from it (change). [Then] All the energy... locked up in the battle between trying to change and resisting change can become available for active participation in our life processes (2005).

But facing the reality of our present is not easy because the process usually forces us to surrender the avoidances and defenses we have built to protect our egos. The process makes us vulnerable, so we tend avoid it. This is why the first stages of the hero's journey often pull us into the painful process of stripping away our defenses so that we can expose and process the problem that is blocking our progress and making natural change impossible.



In the hero's journey, this “stripping away” process begins with Road of Trials, which mythologist Joseph Campbell describes as “the process of dissolving, transcending, or transmuting the infantile images of our personal past” (1949, p. 101). During this early stage of the journey, we are still initiates, so when we encounter challenges, we tend to rely on the defenses we developed earlier in our lives, often as children, because they are the only coping strategies we have.

Unfortunately, these strategies, which were so valuable to us in the past, fail to serve us in the present. As a result, each challenge brings another failure, and with each failure, another layer of the psychological armor we are wearing is peeled away. As Campbell writes, “You are coming into areas of the unconscious that have been repressed...the unintegrated self; it is that repression system that you must pass through” (2004, p. 116).

As the journey pulls us deeper into ourselves, all of our masks, manipulations, and self-deceptions are destroyed. Finally, when we reach the Abyss, we come face to face with our greatest fears and our deepest wounds. In the Abyss, with the illusory self destroyed, we sink into the chaos of no-self. At first, this emptiness seems terrifying, but we soon realize that it is really a “fer-

tile void." The destruction of the pseudo self has made room for the true self to emerge and grow.

This process of going back so that we can go forward, while painful, is essential to our lives. The defenses we raised to protect ourselves in our past have served their purpose. They gave us security and soothed our wounds. However, now that we have grown, it is time to put them aside because they are harming us rather than helping us, blocking us from the journeys we must take to realize our potentials.

We can help ourselves in this process by reframing negative, painful events in our lives, reinterpreting wounds so that they become starting points for growth. We must, as Jean Houston writes, "ask the terrible and unavoidable questions: 'Where and by whom were you wounded?' and 'What or who is trying to be born in you from that wound'" (1987, p. 108). By answering those questions, we can discover who and what we are; we can use the pain as a springboard to growth and freedom. According to William Bridges, an expert on transition management,

Transition does not require that you reject or deny the importance of your old life, just that you let go of it. ...honor the old life for all that it did for you. It got you this far. It brought you everything you have. But now—although it may be some time before you are comfortable actually doing so—it is time for you to let go of it. Your old life is over (2001, p. 16).

According to Bridges, this transformational process is often just a way of "catching up" to where we should have been had our growth not been sidetracked. He writes, "...in a sense we are ripe for the experience [of change] because we are a little (in some cases, a lot) behind the curve of our own development" (2001, p. 36). We may be running what Bridges calls a "transition deficit."

Using the terms of the journey, the journey we are taking, or must take, has fallen behind or no longer fits the person we have become—or could be. Perhaps we are locked into our old ways of being, and those old ways are like a tourniquet that is no longer needed, originally intended to stop the bleeding of a wound, but now choking the blood from of our lives. Frequently this is why not changing is more painful than changing. We sense the potentials in our life and want to pursue them, but the



*Sometimes transformation and restoring flow involve some "catching up," getting to where we would have been had our growth not been interrupted.*

unfinished business of our past holds us back. The pain arises when we feel our lives slipping away.

In other cases, an experience—such as travel, combat, college or Peace Corp—has changed who we are as a person and we can no longer return to our former life because the story it holds for us is incompatible with the person we are now. This is often the case with trauma, especially combat trauma.

Which brings us back to the paradoxical theory of change: the first step in change is not going forward, but going back—back to the person we really are. We must quit trying to change and, instead, embrace who and where we are now. With that awareness, we can face our wounds and fears. We can resolve whatever is blocking us and learn to live in the here and now. With the resulting awareness and insight, the change that had been impossible for us will emerge spontaneously and authentically.

This is also the paradox of the heroic journey. The first stage of the journey is not a going forward, but a going back, deconstructing the protective masks and illusions we built in a former life. Then, when the delusions are stripped away and we have our feet firmly planted in the reality of our lives, we can gradually begin to move forward again, embracing our potentials and our futures because we are no longer encumbered by the baggage of our past.

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