

## The Gestalt Pedagogical Method as a Path to Better Mental Health

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**ABSTRACT.** Gestalt pedagogy takes an anthropological starting point: the here and now. We use the example from the Gospel of John (8:1-11); it was Jesus' withdrawal that enabled the crowd to embark on the path of healing. Using the students' experiences and Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic approach, we show how he uses the process of distancing in his hermeneutics. This dimension of Gestalt and the hermeneutic process enable a healthy interaction between figure and ground in the complexity of life as understood by Gestalt psychology. The narrative used by the regular methodological approach in Gestalt pedagogy and Christian proclamation is used to show the need for distance. In this way we create a fruitful hermeneutic process that incorporates a meaningful distance for a more effective pedagogical and therapeutic process. Above all, such a distancing process with a suitable method enables the individual to act more and more independently in everyday situations. It is precisely the religious dimension that makes it possible to step out of the here and now in order to strengthen the sources of resources for life.

**Keywords:** Gestalt pedagogy, P. Ricoeur, religiosity, distancing, dramatization, mental health

### Introduction

Modern life is much more stressful than it was a few years ago. There are many reasons for this: the pressure at work, the hardships brought on by the daily news of horrors around the world, the fast pace of life, and the list goes on. Today, there is also more social pressure on the individual. Although we talk about a free and tolerant society, this is not what we experience in everyday life.

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The pressure of the media and especially the pressure of social networks, which have become the modern forum, is getting worse and worse.<sup>1</sup> Despite the fact that modern technology offers many new opportunities to communicate and meet, young people are getting increasingly isolated. Their activity on social networks is increasing. At the same time, their loneliness is growing, which goes against the fundamental promises of the creators of modern digital communication.<sup>2</sup> If Paul Ricoeur understands the creation of one's own identity through narratives<sup>3</sup>, then one could say that we have many more options today than in the past. However, the short posts on social networks are not what one might understand as a narrative that boosts self-esteem. These posts are mainly aimed at getting likes, shares, etc. We regularly show ourselves on social media in a way that appears good to the public, and not as we truly are or want to be in order to build our own personality. We seem to have betrayed our own freedom in the name of freedom. The biggest problem with this is that when we read short pieces of information on the internet, we are not even aware of their manipulative and limited nature. We look for news that fascinates us and, in our amazement, we forget the criterion of truth.<sup>4</sup>

Many agree that this is also the reason why there are more and more problems with mental health among the youth.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, it is increasingly the task of educators to help young people on the path to adulthood. This help must be aimed at increasing their independence and their resilience to negative social pressures. If we want to speak of genuine religious education, we must also keep this in mind in religious upbringing. Not only for people in the Old Testament, but throughout history, the transmission of faith through narrative has had fundamental importance.<sup>6</sup> Today, these biblical narratives are hardly ever heard. Young people in particular struggle with this, because they feel like the biblical stories have little to do with their lives. That is why it is important for young people and for all of us to relate the biblical texts to our own lives.

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<sup>1</sup> The European Union Mental Health surveys 2023 showed that 46% percent of EU citizens have experienced emotional or psychosocial problems.

<https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3032> accessed in 18. 11. 2024

<sup>2</sup> David Kraner, "Osamljenost in raztresenost v mreži socialnih medijev (Loneliness and Distraction in the Social Media Network)," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 83, no. 4 (2023): 1003–1022.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another* (University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Manca Erzetič, *Hermenevika pričevanja* (Inštitut Nove revije, zavod za humanistiko, 2023), 152.

<sup>5</sup> Manfred Spitzer, *Cyberkrank! Wie das digitalisierte Leben unsere Gesundheit ruiniert* (Droemer, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> "Be on your guard! Make certain that you do not forget, as long as you live, what you have seen with your own eyes. Tell your children and your grandchildren about the day you stood in the presence of the Lord your God at Mount Sinai, when he said to me, 'Assemble the people. I want them to hear what I have to say, so that they will learn to obey me as long as they live and so that they will teach their children to do the same.'" (Dt 4, 9-10) There are many similar examples in the Bible where narrative and listening are the foundation of faith.

Our presentation will show how this is still possible today through the approach of Christian Gestalt pedagogy.

### **The role of a narrative approach in Christian Gestalt pedagogy**

If Christian spirituality is to find its way into the life of the modern young person, he or she must first enter into the narrative of his or her own life. The pressure of society's expectations can be a good opportunity to show how we can do this today. This can be achieved by strengthening our own experience by drawing back into the biblical text. Just as we read in the passage from the Gospel of John about a woman committing adultery (Jn 8, 1-11), where we learn about the pressure of the environment on the individual, we can draw parallels to the young people of today. Christianity still has the power to follow Jesus and strengthen the young person so that he or she can withstand the pressure and make a strong foundation in life. Despite declared freedom, individual rights and the protection of privacy, young people today are often placed before the 'court' of public opinion. They are exposed in all their vulnerability and weakness. They need strength to trust in the power of forgiveness and a new beginning.<sup>7</sup> Above all, however, they need to be able to stand up for themselves (in a good sense of the word). Not in arrogance and contempt for every rule of society, but like the adulteress in the Gospel of John, who knows that she only needs a word from the right authority to have the strength for a new beginning. And the youth of today must experience this for themselves many times on their way to adulthood. This is the fundamental characteristic of Christian Gestalt pedagogy: learning through experience in a safe environment, with an openness to the transcendent, the divine.

Integrative Gestalt pedagogy is based on Gestalt psychology and therapy. The former originated with the Graz School, the latter with the work of Fritz and Laura Perls in the USA. The very name of the movement indicates a fundamental view of people and society. "Gestalt" is more than something that is perceived in individual parts; it is wholeness and unity. F. Perls is considered to be the first therapist to encourage his clients to focus on the perception of what is happening in the "now" moment. For Gestalt therapy and Gestalt pedagogy, the 'here-and-now principle' is paramount.<sup>8</sup> In pedagogical work, working according to the here-and-now principle is also a fundamental feature of dynamic group work.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Andrej Šegula, "Resonanca in sinoda v kontekstu sodobne pastoralne teologije," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 82, no. 3 (2022): 679.

<sup>8</sup> Felix Marcus Hufnagel, "Geštaltfilozofija-Geštalt psihologija-Geštalt terapija," in *Geštalt pedagogika nekoč in danes*, Ljubljana, ed. S. Gerjol et al., (Društvo za krščansko pedagogiko, 2011), 7.

<sup>9</sup> Alenka Kobolt, "Skupina kot prostor socialnega vedenja," *Socialna pedagogika*, 13, no. 4 (2009): 368.

It is characteristic of Gestalt pedagogy that it understands teaching and learning primarily as a relational process. It aims to form a holistic view of the experienced person and their thinking, feeling and acting.<sup>10</sup> Gestalt educators achieve these goals through specific methods using creative approaches. The preferred methods of Gestalt pedagogy include: identification/projection, fantasy/imagination, exercises in self-perception and perception of others, bodywork and movement, role-playing and simulations, creative media, group communication exercises and consciousness-raising.<sup>11</sup> Gestalt pedagogy uses a variety of existing methods, techniques and media, often derived from experiential learning, and applies them in its own way. The teacher must be careful not to forget what the main purpose of each teaching method is. He or she must not neglect the fundamental principle of Gestalt pedagogy, which is to relate the subject matter to the concrete life of the student. So, these approaches are not all self-directed, they always lead to the construction of one's own personality and to an exercise in better relationships first within the group and then in society. As a Christian Gestalt pedagogy model, we also include a religious dimension. Personality building goes even deeper and leads to a relationship with God. This is why the power of building spiritual health is even greater.

Gestalt approaches can be used to work effectively with both adults and children. In order for children and young people to be able to express their inner emotional world in a way that is safe for themselves and others and to come into contact with themselves, creative expression in the form of structured play with tools (painting utensils, clay, sandbox, dolls), in which the child projects his or her feelings onto objects, toys or a drawing sheet, is part of the educational process. In this way, the child can come into contact with his or her body and feelings through movement and at the same time reflect on them in a more guided way by transferring them to a medium. This makes it easier to see where the child is doing well and where not, and to see how the child expresses or does not express his or her feelings. Through creative projections and a safe relationship, children come into better contact with their body, get in touch with their feelings and can express themselves in an appropriate way, which enables them to strengthen their sense of self and improve their self-esteem. Group education is particularly suitable for young people who find it easier to express themselves in the safety of a group and thus acquire social skills. "Part of the individual's security is provided by social interaction in groups, including

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<sup>10</sup> O. A. Burow, "Was ist Gestaltpädagogik," in *Gestaltpädagogik in der Schule*, ed. H. Gudjon and O. A. Burow, (Bergmann und Helbig, 1998), 15.

<sup>11</sup> Hans Neuhold, "Christlich orientierte Gestaltpädagogik und ganzheitliche Bildung," in *Leben fördern – Beziehung stiften. Festschrift für Albert Höfer*, ed. H. Neuhold, (Institut für Integrative Gestaltpädagogik und Seelsorge, 1997), 17.

the rules, norms and established roles that the individual tries out again and again as he or she grows older and matures. This is the basis for the development of social skills. At the same time as relationships develop, members in each group learn from each other."<sup>12</sup>

Gestalt pedagogy is not fundamentally linked to Christianity or religious pedagogy, but its development in relation to religiosity and the integration of Christianity was influenced by the catholic priest, religious pedagogue and psychotherapist Albert Höfer. Instead of an analytical and strictly structured religious education based mainly on dogmas, he opted for a different concept - he introduced the concept of integrative teaching into religious education based on "the Bible, which proclaims faith in the risen and present Christ, who is still active in healing today."<sup>13</sup> According to Höfer, man's self-discovery is thus founded and justified in the experience of God. This does not refer directly to his spirituality and his relationship with God, but to his nature as man and woman and how he develops in the eyes of God. Through concrete biblical stories, individuals learn to process their own feelings and their relationships with people and with God. Biblical themes (family conflicts, reconciliation, jealousy, betrayal, etc.) help to bring the seemingly abstract and distant reality closer to real life situations. Since the biblical man is concrete and has many faces, the individual can identify with him and find orientation for his life. Jesus accepted people as they were without judging them. He also addressed all social classes and paid particular attention to the poorest and those on the margins of society. The Gestalt pedagogy approach therefore encourages educators not to shy away from the difficulties and problems they encounter in the group or classroom, following the example of 'pedagogical love'. Through compassionate understanding, which helps the educator to empathize with the student's experiences, feelings and motivations,<sup>14</sup> the educator can help the student to overcome the dark sides and transform them into positive experiences. Following the example of Jesus, the educator is encouraged to see in the student his full potential, what he or she can become. In this way, the educator also builds the student's self-confidence and hope.<sup>15</sup>

Changes in the lives of the biblical characters can be viewed from several different perspectives. Sudden steps of transformation are sometimes challenged by crisis situations in the landscape, which, as expected, also carry a psychological and symbolic contextualization, such as the Flood, the river, the Sea of Reeds,

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<sup>12</sup> Kobolt, "Skupina kot prostor socialnega vedenja," 372.

<sup>13</sup> Iva Nežič Glavica, "Geštalt pedagogika v službi oblikovanja duhovno religiozne dimenzije življenja," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 81, no. 1 (2021): 136.

<sup>14</sup> Iva Nežič Glavica, "Zaupam, zato si upam: zaupanje kot temeljna geštalt pedagoška kategorija," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 81, no. 4 (2021): 913.

<sup>15</sup> Nežič Glavica, "Geštalt pedagogika v službi," 142.

etc. Such key challenges then sensitize the biblical man to such an extent that he intensifies his relationship with God and - more courageously and with less fear - undertakes further steps of transformation, which ultimately turns his entire biography into a process of change. Accordingly, we see, for example, how with Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob's stories, life changes lead to personality transformation, while with Moses his personal transformation creates new life circumstances.<sup>16</sup>

### **A concrete example of the use of a biblical text**

In our training courses at the Faculty of Theology UL, which are primarily aimed at educators, we make use of this power of biblical passages. The participants in these courses have no theological background and often have little religious experience. They are often even afraid of any religious dimension, because in the Slovenian public, religiosity is relegated to the periphery of society. We therefore start from a purely anthropological premise and always include the religious dimension. We do not try to explain or clarify this first, in order to awaken our own experience of the need to transcend everyday life. The training for Gestalt educators consists of ten thematic modules. Each one focuses on a particular theme and is always accompanied by a specific biblical text that addresses the theme in one way or another.

Thus, in the third set of ten full three days meetings at the level of basic education, we work through the selected miracles of Jesus. Each individual chooses a miracle from the four proposed biblical texts. In addition to the passage about the adulterous woman, these include: Jesus raises a widow's son (Lk 7, 11-17), the calming of a storm (Mt 8, 23-27) and the account of the healing of the crippled woman on the Sabbath (Lk 13, 11-17). The selection of the so-called personal passage takes place in several stages. The first step is to meet oneself. Each person is invited to face his or her moments of helplessness and the desire to be helped. Through this experience, they go into the depth of their experience of this helplessness through what is called guided meditation. After this guided meditation, where each person experiences the need for a miracle in his or her own concrete way in life, the participants are invited to read all four Gospel passages. This is followed by two days of work with the chosen passage, first alone and then in a small group. The working method is simple. They are given a coloring sheet of a selected Gospel passage. Then they color it on their

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<sup>16</sup> Stanko Gerjolj, "Mut zu Lebensveränderungen aus der Sicht der biblischen Beziehungsdynamiken," in *Die Kunst zu leben – zum Menschsein befreien*, ed. H. Reitbauer et al. (EHP-verlag, 2024), 69.

own, as they feel at that moment. In small groups, they then 'read' the coloring sheet. The leader does not encourage the interpretation of the coloring sheet, but guides the work in such a way that each person accepts his/her weakness and seeks help. First, he or she seeks help in the group and then from God.

At the end of the entire three-day course, there is a dramatization of the passage about the adulteress. The course leaders choose one of the participants to play the role of the adulteress and one for Jesus. Everyone else is a mob. How this is experienced by the participants is best left to one of the participants: "What followed was one of the most shocking scenes in the Gestalt: we acted out the scene with the adulteress. I was part of the mob. At the beginning we could not play the role - we were too weak. And then I really took on the role and I was terrible. We were loud, aggressive, scary. I was not just scared of the crowd; I was scared of myself. You are part of the mob; you go with the flow or you get carried away by it. I was surprised by a teammate who was reserved, and then he shouted and screamed [so much] that I was left speechless. We realized that the power of the crowd is much greater and cannot be controlled. The crowd does not ask if it's fair - it has no substance and no positive things. If you are just a means to an end, you do not stand a chance."<sup>17</sup>

From their words, we can see how deep the experience goes and how quickly they make a connection to their own lives. Leaders have to be extremely careful here because there are strong emotions involved. That is why there is always an act of reconciliation and prayer after the performance. The need for prayer arises spontaneously during such work. Only then does the reflection follow, during which we can also clarify the whole process theoretically. The results are regularly extremely positive, as we can see again from the words of one participant: "I felt paralyzed as I played a role in the mob. I was part of the mob, I felt the pressure it put on the sinner, I heard the various shouts, I watched the reactions of the sinner and Jesus, but I could not join in the shaming and mocking myself. It was important to me that after the difficult role plays, we stood up and hugged the member of the group who was playing the role of the sinner. I was very touched by the idea that after Jesus touches or heals someone, he sends them back to life healed. This is how Jesus gives me life in the different relationships I find myself in. Sometimes he brings me health and joy through me, other times he brings me health through others."

It's an obvious act that triggers religious feelings in participants with

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<sup>17</sup> At the end of the course, each participant must write a final paper. In addition to the theoretical and practical work, he/she must write his/her own reflection on the experience of the entire training. The references I use come from these final reflections. The participants are aware of this and agree to its use.

little or almost no faith, while awaking spiritual resources for resilience in life. We do not talk as much about these resources that come from religiosity, but they emerge as if they were here themselves. To confirm this, I quote words from a participant's personal reflection: "God has found me again and will not let me go. Like Moses, I realize that in times of need I finally seek God's help. How glad I am that I can feel Him and that he takes me in his arms again and again. How often do I insist with my own head that I can manage on my own. When I cannot, I give myself to Him. He really has a nerve with me. I forget to thank Him, but I also remember to remind Him when He forgets something. My prayers are short. It's a waste of time for litanies. I can spend my time doing something else. That is so naive, so simple in my world. But deep down, I can feel how much he loves me. I do not hide anything from him. He knows me. I do not need to apologize. I must accept the consequences of my actions. There is no other way." There is not much to add to that. This method has enabled individuals throughout the process to feel themselves. In doing so, they also felt themselves in relation to their neighbors and the society in which they lived. They were able to see themselves in all the entanglements of the everyday flow of life as dictated by the 'street'. Most importantly, they have found a place for the transcendent, the need for God. This process is much easier to understand if we relate it to the hermeneutic process of the French philosopher P. Ricoeur.

### **Distanciation as a path to a better self-image**

In this concrete presentation of the methodological work in Christian Gestalt pedagogy, we have seen how the individual can, here and now, first accept himself and then in some way to heal his own weakness. Through the guided reading of a selected Bible passage, everyone first encounters themselves and becomes aware of this in a safe group. Then, through a dramatization that allows a certain distanciation from the experience of life itself, as P. Ricoeur argues in his hermeneutical philosophy, he can open himself to God. But first one must perceive oneself reflexively through the stories that enter one's own life through the stories of others. The self compares itself with others in order to create space for that which lies outside itself and to open itself up to the transcendent. So Ricoeur presupposes a subject that is 'capable of narrative'. We are open for narrative through imitation - mimesis. This must be understood as an activity, an active process of imitation or representation. He distinguishes several stages in this mimesis: The first stage is a person's ability to distinguish what they are narrating and in what way. It is about the person as a 'narrating being'. Ricoeur understands this ability as 'mimesis I'. When we think about

ourselves, we do not close ourselves off from the world, but the outside world moves in on us. If we reinforce this through dramatization, the process is even stronger. It is about the interplay between our perception of ourselves and everything around us. It is the dramatization of the 'sacred' passage that sets the process of active imitation in motion even more strongly. Mimesis I, which forms the basis of self-perception as capable of narrative, is automatically transformed into active imitation through dramatization.

In order to understand a story when reading or listening to it, you have to put yourself in the story, to lose yourself in it, so to speak. This is mimesis II. In the dramatization of the Gospel passage, this 'loss' is expressed in the text. Everyone forgets their everyday 'polite' behavior and assumes a role that is often ignored in life, even if we live it in one way or another. Although the participants are convinced that they are imitating the characters from the Gospel, they quickly recognize themselves in these roles. In the next step, the reader/listener returns from the story to his or her own life. This third stage, Mimesis III, is the creative understanding of the story. This brings new understanding for one's own life and change.<sup>18</sup>

It is therefore a process which, in a constant dynamic between distancing and returning to life, helps to shape the story of one's own life as well as that of others. When reading/listening, we stand in front of the text and also in front of our own lives. Reading/listening creatively means that we can see ourselves anew with the help of imagination and thus also create a new world. It is this hermeneutical process, as described by Ricoeur, that takes place when working with biblical texts. Dramatization in particular helps to make the plunge into the text, mimesis II, even more powerful. From the testimonies of the individual participants, we have seen how necessary it is to take a distancing, mimesis III, which helps to process one's own life in the spirit of the Gospel.

## Conclusion

The most important aspect of the dramatization is that this transformation took place in a Christian setting. While the adulteress recognized her weaknesses, she was at the same time able to see new possibilities in Jesus. Ricoeur's whole philosophical endeavor is to open the individual to the so-called good life for oneself and at the same time with and for others. This is only possible through a kind of loss of self in one's own actions or texts. For Ricoeur, the biblical texts are the best way to find true inner strength for the good life. In these texts, the

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<sup>18</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Krog med pripovedjo in časovnostjo* (Apokalipsa, 2000), 120-137.

reader loses himself in a certain way in order to then find a much greater openness first to new possibilities and then to a kind of transcendence, we could say: to religiosity. For these texts make use of a logic that is not of this world and open doors that this world cannot open.

The example of the adulteress makes this dynamic even clearer. The participants, both the mob and the sinner, must first step out of their current role in order to return more easily and better to the here and now of everyday life. Jesus' demand that the one who is free from all sin should throw the first stone at the adulteress opens the healing process. Both the sinner and her judges must look inwards. Both scribes and Pharisees recognize that the solution to the aggressiveness that drives them to condemnation is to acknowledge their own dark sides.<sup>19</sup> Modern man, who likes to hide behind the sins of others and justify his actions with contempt, can learn here the way of inner healing from personal bitterness. The dramatization of this Gospel passage teaches us that rigid adherence to legalism does not bring true liberation. Looking for someone to blame for what is bad in society leads to more injustice. Mercy and understanding are the only things that bring hope. Jesus acts as a true therapist with the dimension of hope for a new, fuller and healthier life.<sup>20</sup>

The whole process that Christian Gestalt pedagogy sets in motion to strengthen mental health, inner stability and self-satisfaction is best illustrated by the words of one participant's final reflection: 'How do I feel?!?' Like a naked goddess, able to be strong despite a deeply internalized vulnerability. Where do I penetrate everything that stands in my way and destroy it in a redemptive way? Wow!!! Priceless, even though I am on the verge of a melancholic cry almost every moment, a mixture of sadness and happiness, pain and relief, at the thought of the coming meeting, the journey together through the depths of my soul. Will I be able to cope with my own deep feelings, as if the last fiber of the fabric of my emotions had failed for a moment?!? I do not know, but I suspect I will unearth a jewel of the soul, for myself and for all those who will be by my side."

This is the goal of all educational work, which does much to help young people withstand the pressures of society. By using Gestalt pedagogical approaches, we first educate the educators and through them the young people to recognize the

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<sup>19</sup> Tomaš Halik, „Wege einer neuen Evangelisierung?“, in *Das Ewige im Fluss der Zeit: Der Gott, den wir brauchen*, K. Rehustorfer ed. (Herder, 2016), 223.

“I cannot believe in a faith, a church, a Christ without wounds. Everything that is offered to us on the religious market today should be subjected to an authenticity test: Do the offerings bear any kind of wounds? Have they not removed the elements of tragedy, pain and insecurity? Are they not just ... shiny offers for a quick path to happiness, success and contentment? Christ shows us his wounds so that we too may have the courage to admit our wounds and scars and not cover them up.”

<sup>20</sup> Hans Neuhold, *Integrative Gestaltpädagogik und biblische Spiritualität* (EHP, 2023), 159-160.

pressures of society and the dangers of the demands of closed and fundamentalist groups, and at the same time, through Christianity, we give them the strength to free themselves from the pressures of society or to protect themselves in advance against groups that are too narrow-minded. This is true Christian spirituality, which draws its fullness from the incarnate God. All pedagogical and therapeutic work, even if the biblical theme is not in the foreground, opens up a religious dimension. It is important that this dimension has a therapeutic effect, as we can confirm one last time in the words of a participant: "On a religious level, I felt a deep connection between life and religiosity. Through the biblical narratives, I recognized my own destiny, personal trials, mistakes, grief and the possibility of forgiveness and new hope. Through the liturgy, the biblical texts, the songs and the meditation, I felt the possibility of changing my idea of religiosity. Religiosity is not an activity alongside all the others, but I felt it was a fundamental event from which everything comes and to which everything returns."

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