

Thomas Ameel interviewing Julianne Appel-Opper

Thomas Ameel (T) When asked to do a masterclass for our conference, what did you like about the theme 'Courage'?

Julianne Appel-Opper (J) When I hear the word courage, I ask myself: What are good conditions for courage? Courage means to gear up, to move forward, to speak, to act – very active bodily figures. But how can we dare this?

My reply may sound simple: If we have experienced another body as present, open, available, listening, supporting, and daring to be visibly impacted. Then, we develop a sense that we can impact and that we might make a difference.

I contacted friends about this interview. The words they said mattered, but what was much more important had been their bodily reactions, a leaning forward, some kind eyes and voices on the phone which I still feel.

Courage also has been an ongoing theme for me. I've been working as a therapist now for 30 years. Thanks to the openness of participants of my workshops and trainings, I have found the courage to speak more freely. Over these years, I have arrived at: instead of speaking about or pointing at bodily phenomena, to being with to my client with actual announced movements instead of merely words.

T: How do you see 'courage' within the framework of your body-oriented - Integrative - Gestalt approach?

J: I believe that we need to develop a kind of relational embodied courage which invites the other. When I sit with a client, I am faced with two bodies:

One who wants to be heard, and the other who is too scared, too ashamed to speak. I believe that in our interventions we have to find a way to honor both.

In recent years, I have worked with clients who have had very powerful introjects of "I am nobody" from emotional neglect. As "a nobody" it is challenging to be reached as it is incredible painful to then come in contact with the contact holes of their early lives. And still there is one body who needs/wants to speak, we just need to be as patient and as respectful as we can.

If I point to my own bodily resonances or impulses, I risk to be laughed at or looked at as if I was silly. I prefer this to the risk that I might shame the other body.

T: How do you think a body-oriented approach can offer support to Gestalt practitioners to be courageous within the fields they work in?

J: Every psychotherapy approach is implicitly body-oriented as we move and are moved as two bodies communicating with each other. It is HOW we work with this body-to-body-communication.

In general, I believe that a body-oriented approach helps Gestalt practitioners to stay with the not-knowing. Bodies speak of their stories in their own bodily melodies and rhythms depending on how they are listened to, received and acknowledged by another body.

To work more body-oriented, we need both courage and humbleness and a lot of patience not to go into action or thinking too quick.

T: How would you deepen the theme of ‘courage’ within a 4 hour masterclass?

J: In this class we will explore courage at a bodily level. Exercises and experiments will help us to focus on the courage:

to embody, to be a living body and to speak as body to another body.

There is something about knowing and not-knowing here:

One side is that we need to dare to stay in the not-knowing and on the other side we need to gather knowledge about bodies. Beside the experiential part of the masterclass, there will be also time to discuss how traumas are held in the body, how we get bodily infected or what to do when a client goes into dissociation for example.

The workshop will be the place to take risks during experiments and exercises to deepen our learning of how to work in a living-body-to-living-body way.

There will also be time for a live supervision or a live therapy demonstration, hopefully for both.