

# TWO PATHS, ONE JOURNEY: THE MEANING OF PRESENCE IN THE SALESIAN EDUCATION AND THERAPEUTIC ENCOUNTERS

*by Paul Formosa*

John Bosco (1815-1888), is a widely recognised 19<sup>th</sup> Century educator from Northern Italy, who contributed to the change in the prevailing notions of education and young people. He sought to empower the positive in young people, when education and learning were still mostly repressive in style. Bosco realised that youth could only be reached through understanding, trust, friendship and kindness...<sup>1</sup> The major political and industrial upheaval taking place at the time saw countless young people leaving their home and family in the country to look for employment in industrialised cities such as Turin where John Bosco lived and worked, often resorting to crime for survival. It was such young people that Bosco sought to help by realising that they were “not only searching for a job, but also yearning for a caring relative or adult.”<sup>2</sup> In this milieu, Bosco offered them lodging and an education through a caring and spiritual presence.

Bosco sought to create a movement in favour of young people, developed through the Salesian Congregation, that he named after St. Francis de Sales whom Bosco presented as a model to his followers. This movement, the Salesian charism, evolved in the social context just described, but in retrospect Bosco himself could see how it was intimately linked to his own personal life experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Grech, *Salesian Spiritual Companionship* (Malta: Horizons, 2018), 188.

<sup>2</sup> Grech, *Salesian Spiritual Companionship*, 251.

Many commentators on Bosco's work agree that, "his pedagogy was both holistic and sacramental in nature."<sup>3</sup> Gallagher calls it "the sacrament of the present moment."<sup>4</sup> Sacrament refers to the presence of God in people's lives, and Bosco, being a man immersed in the spirituality of his times, believed that God was constantly present through the everyday activities of everyone. Sacrament and wholeness need presence both on the human level as well as on the spiritual plane.

### **'Presence' in the Educational System of Don Bosco**

Since the earliest studies on Bosco's educational methods, the value of presence has been presented as fundamental. Early writers were clearly influenced by the style of writing of their time and the educational influences present. Moreover, they wrote in a style that aimed at making Bosco seem as saintly as possible. They therefore emphasized elements of divine intervention and presented him through the paternalistic perspective valued at the time.<sup>5</sup> However, they recognised that Bosco's fundamental concern is the person rather than the system. Bosco challenged a system that was based on the authoritarian figure of the educators that instilled fear in their subjects and exercised authority without creating any sense of familiarity. On the contrary, Bosco created a space for presence and relationships as against the repressive system that negates relationships and creative presence and avoids familiarity.<sup>6</sup>

Bosco, in a very pragmatic and effective way, confronted the validity of the *modus operandi* and created his own method with the value of a personal presence at the centre. McPake agrees with Guy Avanzini in emphasising that Bosco had in mind "love and presence that is seen, that is felt, that is experienced."<sup>7</sup> At the heart of Salesian presence lies the Italian word '*amorevolezza*' referring to the key element of the Salesian way of relating to young people. Often translated as "loving kindness" it highlights the value of authentic relationships in any educational encounter that speaks the "language of the heart."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Martin McPake, *The Constitutions - A Simple Commentary* (Madras: The Citadel, 1978), 50.

<sup>4</sup> J. Conor Gallagher, in the Preface of Jean Pierre De Caussade, *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, (United States: Tan-Books, 2010), vii.

<sup>5</sup> Patrick Egan and Mario Midali, *Don Bosco's Place in History* (Rome: LAS, 1993), 30.

<sup>6</sup> John Morrison, *The Educational Philosophy of St. John Bosco* (New York: Salesiana Publishers, 2010), 101.

<sup>7</sup> McPake, *The Constitutions - A Simple Commentary*, 114.

<sup>8</sup> Francesco, *Esortazione Apostolica Evangelii Gaudium* (Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), 101.

More recent writers, inspired by new developments and deeper research have moved away from the romanticized style of the early writers and in their analysis uncovered a more humanistic approach that is more akin to the contemporary understanding of a supportive presence. Grech states that “Bosco promoted humanism and all that is good in the human nature.”<sup>9</sup> Arthur Lenti states that Bosco had in mind “mature, impartial, spiritual, generous, selfless self-sacrificing love. It is the love enjoined by Jesus. More simply, Don Bosco would say that the educator should love the youngsters in the same way that good Christian parents should love their children.”<sup>10</sup> Rather than the traditional, saintly approach, here Lenti is highlighting the elements of care and concern for the welfare of the young person present in Bosco’s understanding of an educative presence.

Lenti emphasizes that

“Don Bosco had a comprehensive concept of education. It entailed the total development of the person, bringing out to the best possible effect on the person’s potentialities in view of the individual’s functioning as a mature Christian adult in society – a good citizen and a good Christian.”<sup>11</sup>

In discussing the meaning of presence for Bosco, Carlo Loots refers to Andries Baart who did a very detailed research among pastoral workers that work in a big city with areas of poverty.<sup>12</sup> He was interested in understanding how the loving and supportive closeness of pastors “without a desk, a room or a consultation hour”<sup>13</sup> functions with people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Baart says that ‘presence’

“... is being there for others without focusing directly on problem solving ... The most important thing these pastoral ministers bring is the faithful offering of themselves: being there, making themselves available...”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Grech, *Salesian Spiritual Companionship*, 80.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Lenti, *Don Bosco Educational Method* (New Rochelle: Salesian Publications, 1989), 7.

<sup>11</sup> Arthur Lenti, *Don Bosco History and Spirit*. Vol. 3 (Rome: LAS, 2008), 139.

<sup>12</sup> Carlo Loots, “The Theory of Andries Baart as a Source of Inspiration for Education and Assistance” in *Salesian Forum*, (Unpublished, 2018): 1–13.

<sup>13</sup> Andries Baart, *Een Theorie Van Presentie* (Den Haag Lemma, 2006), 11.

<sup>14</sup> Andries Baart, *The Presence Approach: An Introductory Sketch of A Practice* (Utrecht: Catholic Theological University, 2002), 1.

In education, Bosco believed that the educator needs to move beyond the formal context and engage with young people in a personal, nonformal environment. “The educator must establish an abiding presence with young people. He must seek to be in touch with young people in all possible situations of the school day and beyond, especially in activities that allow the educator to associate with young people not simply in the role of a teacher but as a brother or friend.”<sup>15</sup> Bosco himself urged those working in Salesian environments that only by loving the things the young people love, will the young person in turn love the things that the educator proposes.<sup>16</sup>

Education starts from an encounter at the human level, “meeting the students on their own turf.”<sup>17</sup> In Bosco’s style of engagement with the young people, one can find some similarity with the ‘I–Thou’ relationship presented by Martin Buber: “Every human person looks bashfully yet longingly in the eyes of another for the yes that allows him to be.”<sup>18</sup> An education that supports the transformation of each person reflecting “the uniqueness of the individual”.<sup>19</sup>

The resulting atmosphere that was created by Bosco was conducive to “diminish the inevitable tensions between superiors and subjects and allow the latter to achieve their full growth as persons.”<sup>20</sup> In *Don Bosco’s Option for Youth and his Educational Approach*, Luciano Pazzaglia, refers to this environment as “the serene environment of a family”<sup>21</sup> while Sullivan describes it as “a hospitable space for learning.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Lenti, *Don Bosco History and Spirit (Vol. 3)*, 156.

<sup>16</sup> Salesian Congregation, *Constitutions and Regulations* (India: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 2015), 258-268.

<sup>17</sup> Arthur Lenti, *Don Bosco Educational Method* (New Rochelle: Salesian Publications, 1989), 7.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Buber, *To Hallow This Life - an Anthology* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1974), 75.

<sup>19</sup> Anthony Bryk, Valerie Lee, and Peter Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 141.

<sup>20</sup> Luciano Pazzaglia, “Don Bosco Option for Youth and His Educational Approach” in Patrick Egan, & Mario Midali, *Don Bosco Place in History* (Rome: LAS, 1993), 289.

<sup>21</sup> Pazzaglia, “Don Bosco Option for Youth and His Educational Approach” in Patrick Egan, & Mario Midali, *Don Bosco Place in History*, 289.

<sup>22</sup> David J. Sullivan, *Catholic Schools in Contention* (Leamington: Veritas, 2000), 185ff.

## Presence as Presentness

Presence is at the heart of Gestalt theory. Much value is given to the immediate, transient moment that allows flow figure formation to take place. We are affectively present insofar as we are immersed in the here and now. However, the sequence of contacting in the present moment that is of such great importance “is often hard to grasp because we so often jump out of the present ongoing experience to take the objective third person view point.”<sup>23</sup> The therapist has to be constantly aware of the changing figure and moves along with it.

From a Gestalt theoretical perspective, one engages in a healthy process only when one is able to maintain awareness in the present. Cohen refers to this as present-ness.<sup>24</sup> In the therapeutic environment, the therapist needs to be constantly aware of and responsive to emergent events. By responding to each unique moment in the here and now, the therapist inspires the client to enter the same present-ness.

The concept of present-ness, however, is not enough to explain the whole meaning of presence. “The actual and fulfilled present – exists only in so far as presentness, encounter, and relation exist.”<sup>25</sup> In view of the phenomenological approach of Gestalt therapy, the process of contact in the here and now “allows awareness (the ability to be fully present at the contact boundary with the other) to be the guide so as to find a new therapeutic solution that always comes out of the experience of the situation and therefore out of how client and therapist work to co-create it.”<sup>26</sup> It is in the meeting in between that the co-creation can emerge. Healing can happen through a relational meeting between the therapist and the client. “Healing does not result from something the therapist does to the client... it comes from their meeting.”<sup>27</sup> As Buber would declare, “only as the You becomes present does presence come into being.”<sup>28</sup> According to Hycner “when two people surrender to the

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<sup>23</sup> Daniel N. Stern, *The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life* (New York: WW.Norton, 2004), 33.

<sup>24</sup> Alan Cohen, “Presentness and Presence in Gestalt Therapy,” *Gestalt Review*, (2018): 21-24.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), 63.

<sup>26</sup> Margherita Spagnuolo-Lobb and Nancy McWilliams, *The Therapeutic Presence in Psychoanalysis and Gestalt Psychotherapy an Update in Present Society* (Siracuse: Istituto di Gestalt HCC Italy srl., 2018), 5.

<sup>27</sup> William Heard, *The Healing Between - A Clinical Guide to Dialogical Psychotherapy* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993), 11.

<sup>28</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 63.

‘between’ – called ‘existential trust’ – the possibility of I-Thou relation emerges.”<sup>29</sup>

E. Nevis (1987) defines presence as a “living out of basic assumptions regarding how one influences or helps others.”<sup>30</sup> He says that “the therapist possesses an underlying vision and theory for how to engage people”<sup>31</sup> which is then reflected in his behaviour. The therapist needs to be fully aware of his own assumptions and beliefs as well as his ability to create connections built on trust. E. Nevis proposes that the therapist must “provide a presence otherwise lacking in the system.”<sup>32</sup> Nevis recognizes that it is hard to grasp the mystery of how presence evolves, just as others like Halpern acknowledges that presence “is hard to grasp.”<sup>33</sup>

### Presence as Presencing

According to Scharmer<sup>34</sup>, co-founder of the Presencing Institute, there are two ways of learning: from the past and from the future. Scharmer describes ‘presencing’ as both being actively present in the moment as well as a felt sense of the field of future possibilities. It is a form of ‘emergence awareness’ that focuses on the present existing whole but takes inspiration from the source that is the arising, potential future. The latter takes place for instance by focusing on future possibilities without being afraid. For this movement to happen, Scharmer speaks of the necessity of three openings to take place: of the mind, of the heart and of the will. The three stages imply the recognition of past-driven reality, the acceptance of the need to let go, and the desire to be inspired by one’s future possibilities. This concept can be related to the metaphor that is attributed to the sculptor Michelangelo, who worked hard to release the hand from the marble prison, because he is inspired by the vision of the future figure.

The Theory U model, co-developed by Otto Scharmer, is represented as a U shape that moves from the left-hand side to the right-hand side of the U. For this movement to take place the person must be open to let go of obstructions of thoughts and emotions from the past, to move ‘outside the

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<sup>29</sup> Rich Hycner, “Dialogical Gestalt Therapy: An Initial Proposal,” *The Gestalt Journal*, (1985): 23-49.

<sup>30</sup> Edwin C. Nevis, *Organizational Consulting: A Gestalt Approach* (New York: Gardner Press, 1987), 70.

<sup>31</sup> Nevis, *Organizational Consulting: A Gestalt Approach*, 71.

<sup>32</sup> Nevis, *Organizational Consulting: A Gestalt Approach*, 86.

<sup>33</sup> Sharona Halpern, “On Presence: The Consultant as Model and Presentness and Presence,” *Gestalt Review* 22, 1 (2018): 32.

<sup>34</sup> Otto Scharmer, *Theory U* (California: Koehler Publishers, 2016).

institutional bubble.’ Only when the ‘letting go’ happens can the individual embrace change affectively through a process that Scharmer identifies as the ‘letting come’. The U-model then leads in an upward direction towards the reintegration of the self and the exploration of new and innovative ideas.

Otto Scharmer offers the concept of presencing from the field of leadership, but it can present an interesting and challenging approach to the field of Gestalt Therapy.

We’ve come to believe that the core capacity needed to access the field of the future is presence. We first thought of presence as being fully conscious and aware in the present moment. Then we began to appreciate presence as deep listening, of being open beyond one’s preconceptions and historical ways of making sense. We came to see the importance of letting go of old identities and the need to control and as Salk said, making choices to serve the evolution of life. Ultimately, we came to see all these aspects of presence as leading to a state of “letting come,” of consciously participating in a larger field for change. When this happens, the field shifts, and the forces shaping the situation can move from re-creating the past to manifest or realizing an emerging future.<sup>35</sup>

## A Holistic Presence

A deep, holistic understanding of Presence is an essential component of any meaningful encounter. Throughout his educative experience with young people, Bosco seeks to create favourable conditions in view of a formative relationship, establishing channels of communication that paved the way for meaningful encounters. In an intelligent, affective and intuitive way, he puts into action psychological processes aimed at eliminating prejudices and mistrust. This type of unique presence can be described as “the capacity to reach people, to create the conditions that foster connection, growth, development and learning.”<sup>36</sup> From a slightly different perspective this can be related to the emptying and seeing with fresh eyes that Scharmer talks about in his Theory U model, creating space for trust and reciprocal sympathy. This consequently opens up for the youth significant horizons of meaning.

One notices that Bosco makes himself totally present to the youngster. This reflects the ‘I-Thou’ relationship spoken of by Buber “It is only possible

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<sup>35</sup> Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, & Betty Sue Flowers, *Presence* (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2005), 13.

<sup>36</sup> Halpern, “On Presence: The Consultant as Model and Presentness and Presence,” *Gestalt Review*, 27.

when I step into the elemental relation with the other [client], that is when he becomes present to me.”<sup>37</sup> In this manner the young person feels understood, welcomed and sustained. These are emotional moments of contact, called ‘moments of meeting’ by Buber (1970) and referred to by Stern<sup>38</sup> as ‘now moments’. These moments of meeting both between therapist and client as well as between educator and student are “not a technique but an existential stance, which includes *presence, inclusion* and *confirmation*.”<sup>39</sup> Such moments of being ‘seen’ and fully ‘acknowledged’ by the other, mark change moments in their lives.

An honest, creative presence needs to be one that listens carefully at every moment. Whether during therapy or in an educative environment, the therapist or the educator helps to create the space for self-discovery and growth. When dealing with the process of facing neurotic introjects, the “task in education as well as in therapy here is to help the young by authentic dialogues guiding and supporting the process of self-discovery of their own values and competencies in their maturing process.”<sup>40</sup> Introjection, is the unconscious identification with a significant other that interrupts the process of growth and “the maintenance of an introjection prohibits full contact with both self and others.”<sup>41</sup>

While therapy leads to healing and deeper awareness of self, it also has an educational value expressed through its support of clients to help them “discover potentials, support personal growth, work on sharpening the senses and awaken innate compassion.”<sup>42</sup> This was also powerfully present in the educational philosophy John Bosco, in how he was present to the young people and is deeply reflected in the development of his educational system.

## Conclusion

Even though Psychology as a self-conscious field of experimental study began in 1879, for Bosco the concepts of presence, presentness and presencing

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<sup>37</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 70.

<sup>38</sup> Stern, *The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life*.

<sup>39</sup> Stephanie Sabar, “What’s a Gestalt?,” *Gestalt Review*, (2013): 6 - 34.

<sup>40</sup> Hans Peter Dreitzel, “The Sabotaging of Introjects: Some thoughts about processing introjects in Gestalt therapy in a changing culture,” *Gestalt Today Malta*, (2019): 33.

<sup>41</sup> Richard G. Erskine, *Relational Patterns, Therapeutic Presence Concepts and Practice of Integrative Psychotherapy* (London: Karnic Books Ltd., 2015), 234.

<sup>42</sup> Dreitzel, “The Sabotaging of Introjects: Some thoughts about processing introjects in Gestalt therapy in a changing culture,” *Gestalt Today Malta*, (2019): 37.

were already ingrained in his Educational system since 1841 when he started his mission with young people in Turin.

In the light of recent developments in the field of Gestalt and other related fields, the concept of presence as experienced by Bosco and developed by many researchers and therapists can be compared and confronted to enlighten each other. Through the synthesis of the various approaches the understanding of presence can be better recognized, understood and lived within meaningful educational and therapeutic encounters.