

THE EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH

by Robert Selman

Ever wonder what happens in an encounter group? Or what happens to people in encounter groups? This article deals with one person's experience of one group.

Carl Rogers wrote, in 'Person to Person', 'Man has within him an organismic basis for valuing, to the extent that he can be freely in touch with this valuing process in himself, he will behave in ways which are self-enhancing.

In short, he says that you make things happen. The you within. The part that doesn't try to do or be anything other than the true self.

Many of our illnesses or uncomfortable feelings come out of unhappy or incorrect ways of living. Sight sometimes deteriorates when there is something we don't want to see, or arthritis develops when we are too frightened to grasp the situations around us. The following experience shows this clearly.

Ann is a woman of 35 years. The group is a Gestalt group, which uses a method of awareness developed by Frederick Perls. The leader explains that one technique used in Gestalt groups is to change our language a little so as to personalise everything. For example, we change the word 'it' into 'I', 'can't' into 'won't', and the word 'but' into a positive 'and'. These changes can help to make us feel responsible for our own actions in a positive way, says the leader. There are about fifteen people here tonight. Ann begins.

ANN: 'I'd like to work'.

LEADER: 'Would you sit in the centre of the circle, please.' Ann complies. 'What would you like to work on?'

ANN: Sits nervously screwing up her handkerchief. The knuckles are swollen with arthritis.

LEADER: 'See what your hands are doing. Talk to your hands.'

ANN: (In a bemused fashion) 'Hands on my lap, I can see you twisting around with the handkerchief. You seem very anxious and screwed up.'

LEADER: 'Now be your hands and speak back to you.'

ANN: 'We're a part of you and can't express ourselves. You never notice us. We get screwed up with frustration and pain down here. It's so odd, I don't understand it.'

LEADER: 'Say I'm so odd, I don't understand you.'

Ann repeats and goes back to talking to her missing part, her hands. 'I do care about you, tell me when you get screwed up? Now I'm my hands. I want to do something. I want to clutch something.'

The leader gives her a cushion. Her hands grab it and she begins to knead it powerfully. Her hands twist and screw the cushion, and now she is pounding it on the floor. She starts to cry, 'I know what it is, I've had one miserable marriage and now I have a boyfriend. We've been together for three years now, and I'm caught. I love him so much and I'm afraid it won't work.'

LEADER: 'Say, I won't work.'

ANN: 'I won't work.' She starts to sob deeply. 'He makes me work to earn money and does nothing himself. I want to kill him for this.' She begins to pound the cushion in a greater frenzy. As the violence she feels comes out, she says 'I have always been treated like this, and I am fed up with it.'

LEADER: 'Say this again.'

ANN: 'I'm fed up.'

LEADER: 'Louder.'

ANN: 'I'm fed up.'

LEADER: 'Again.'

ANN: 'I'm fed up.'

Her movements begin to slacken off, and slowly become gentle, caressing and finally loving. 'I can see it now. I've been too afraid to tell him how I feel because I can't express my warm feelings while being used by him. I have to tell him,

either we have to part, or he will have to take the responsibility for us living together.'

LEADER: 'When did the arthritis start?'

ANN: 'About three years ago.' She looks suddenly surprised. 'That's right. Just after I'd started living with Simon.'

After Ann's work, the group asked her questions about her situation. They also expressed how they felt during her work. Some said they could feel Ann's sadness and fear inside themselves, others mentioned how they felt Ann's anger in themselves and could almost feel that they were pounding the cushion with her.

Ann reported later that her arthritis had started to improve. She was sure it was the group who had helped her to regain feeling in her hands by the flow of energy and understanding. After a time she managed to pass on her new insights to her boyfriend. He came to see how damaging his exploitation had been to her. The relationship took on a new basis and became more satisfying and enriching for both of them.

My self-actualising subjects, picked because they were very mature, were at the same time also childish. I called it 'healthy childishness' or 'second naivete'. It has also been recognised by Kris and the ego-psychologists as 'regression in the service of the ego', not only in healthy people, but finally conceded to be a sine qua non of psychological health.



Secondary processes deal with the real world outside the unconscious. Logic, science, common sense, good adjustment,

enculturation, responsibility, rationalism, planning are all secondary process techniques. The primary processes were first discovered in neurotics and psychotics and then in children and only recently in healthy people. The rules by which the unconscious works can be seen most clearly in dreams. Wishes and fears are the primary movers for the Freudian mechanisms.

Abraham Maslow

Towards a Psychology of Being (1962)