

**Pip Rogers**

## **COMMUNICATION - COMMUNION - COMMUNE**

There are thirteen of us in our immediate family. We live in two houses in Finsbury Park which are owned by Islington Council. We occupied just one at first and after about six weeks felt the need for more individual space and so took another house next door but one. We now have a room each and several communal rooms.

The initial functions of these family rooms has changed in our evolution: we still have the kitchen where we take turns, on a voluntary rota, to do the cooking and washing-up; the living room which is used for relaxing, being, talking, dancing, singing and all our meetings. We planned a group room but, like many of the groups we planned, it hasn't happened. It's damp, for one reason; the living room isn't for another.

We have evolved various structures, all different from our ideas before we started. We began by pooling our money and taking what we needed. One result of this was that we spent £45 on food in seven days. Another was that we all eat like lords. So one person took responsibility for the money on a weekly basis. We worked out that £4 a week was sufficient for our family needs and now we put that in and keep whatever else we have for ourselves. Generally this isn't much as living here is a pretty well full-time occupation and there's not much time for earning money. Next, two people took weekly responsibility for shopping. Now we spend about £16 a week on food.

Feeling a need for more basic information about what we are all doing individually, we agreed to meet every morning after breakfast (supposed to be at 9 and is sometimes). In this morning meeting we say what our plans are for the day and the household tasks are taken on (cleaning, washing, looking after the baby). This meeting varies between being hilarious and down-right boring. We also have a note-pad on the wall on which we write the things that have pissed us off during the day that we think others should know about. This is read out if there's anything on it. Mickey Mouse things mostly but they deserve as much attention as the larger issues.

These larger issues, such as community involvement, future plans, our position on drugs, we have dealt with in two ways, either in a simple family meeting or a symposium. For instance, though we had all agreed from the start that we wanted the commune to be drug-free, we soon found that there were differing interpretations of what this meant in practice. So each of us wrote about our personal position on this, and how we saw the communal position. We then shared these in a full meeting. The decision finally reached was that the family would be drug-free as we believe that drugs are an obstruction to our purpose and encourage barriers and isolation. If anyone wanted to use drugs then they would talk about it first to someone in the family, and in no circumstances would they use or bring drugs in our house. We also make this demand on visitors.

We have used groups a lot to bring us closer by various methods - confrontation, discussion, massage, or whatever feels right. We work on being sensitive and caring for one another. The feelings that we become aware of and express through living together and joining in these groups and other activities are central to our strength.

All of these structures tend to be sporadic and a relationship between them and our feelings of insecurity as a group is clear. At the present time, none of them are being used at all. They will return as and when needed to sort out either emotional or organisational difficulties.

Before we started, I had many ideas, expectations, illusions and fears about living in this way. Many of these fantasies have been realised. Others have been confronted and changed by reality. As a group, the most important ideal we shared was an intention to be with a number of people who wanted to get past the barriers that we all erect to defend ourselves. These may serve to protect us from being or feeling hurt, but they also keep us isolated from each other. Reaching out to another means risk, a danger of rejection and pain. The fear of involvement has to be slowly overcome and put aside so that we can share each other on a more meaningful level. Curiously and humanly, this basic ideal of our lives - to be more and more open with each other - presents, to me anyway, a danger that I often withdraw from. A significant day stands out in my memory which may illustrate what I want to say. I remember I was feeling desperately lonely and afraid. I had left a fairly normal life in which I'd been reasonably content and which had been improving, and yet where underneath I was lonely much of the time, holding myself in. I didn't even want to acknowledge that I felt like that, yet I knew that I could feel acceptance and love from the others if only I'd express my need openly. With their help and love I was able to work through this and let myself out a little and let them in. This love and support continues and grows and the times that I withdraw become less frequent and less important.

The life-style I had before was very different and very ordinary. I was married for eight years and lived relatively happily with my wife and kids, leaning, as most people do in our society, on a variety of rôles. Father, husband, provider, leader - all these labels and their loosely prescribed patterns of behaviour fulfilled in me basic strivings for security and acceptance. But this happened in an indirect way that I was unaware of emotionally, was able to block out, because my investment in these rôles was so great that the prospect of changing was too threatening. Recognising this on an intellectual level wasn't enough for me; I had to experience the insecurity that comes from denying these rôles. It wasn't until I left my home and work that the inadequacy that underlay most of the relationships that I was in was revealed in a way that I had to face. The props that I had used were replaced by a number of people. For a while I was very dependant (when I let myself feel it) but the interaction that is provoked by such direct and obvious dependence causes change and growth. At that time it seemed an insoluble paradox of needing to accept myself so that the need for acceptance from others was less urgent.

Now I feel calmer, less anxious; the support I feel from this new family comes from sharing myself with them and they with me. I experience this on many levels, in a way that I am free to express myself as parent, adult, idiot, lover, child and not be compelled by guilt and anxiety into the boxes with labels that stand one on another to build the precarious structure of the nuclear family. The crumbly mortar and many external ties that hold it together make its atmosphere oppressive. The only way of changing the air inside, for me anyway, meant knocking it down. I'm only now beginning to see the sun through the clouds of dust that I raised around me. The air smells good and the sun warm and I intend to stay out in the open and let the wind of change blow round me, even if it does rain sometimes - because then I have the choice of taking shelter or not.

I see children in the future, the countryside, perhaps a farm. The sharing we do I hope will extend to everything we can practically manage. Initially we drew strength from planning external radical activities but the insecurity that these plans sprang from has been answered more directly in our growing love for each other. Now we are in a period of flux, not planning or programming our communal life nor feeling the need to. Each day is new and special and deserves fresh attention with as little preconception as we can manage.