

Jerome Liss

## **LET'S GET TOGETHER- AND GET IT TOGETHER!**

The purpose of this paper is severalfold - to present a document of what is going on in new therapy groups, most of it gleaned from already published sources, so that the information can spread. To unravel some new things we have learned and old things we have relearned from Encounter and its allied groups, so that all people interested in group function can profit from what seems relevant. And to enthuse people about the possibilities of group interplay, especially some of the implications of what I call 'Healing Rituals', so that people who know that we don't know can now know that we do know enough to go forward.

'OK. Now We're Together, What Do We Do?'

The 'how' of the new therapy groups is the critical contribution. If you get a group together without much prior spontaneous experience, and with the idea 'It'll just happen', or 'Just let it happen', it won't. I assure you. And if it does, you're lucky, or maybe you really have some spontaneous group experiences and don't realise it. Perhaps I'm overextending an argument based on my own group learning experience, but I believe there is a great deal to learn about how spontaneously formed groups can work well, no matter what the goals, and this involves a lot of undoing from our institutional group experience. Also I have heard of many spontaneously formed groups falling apart at the seams right away or else carrying on in a boring mechanical way because people are used to being boring and mechanical and do need the group; and though these problems may not arise from the 'Just let it happen' approach of some and the 'I know exactly what should happen' approach of others, these can really drive a well-intentioned and potentially useful group into the ground. This means we must develop our capacities to conduct groups satisfying and effective enough for people to want them to continue.

Experience is the best key to 'facilitate' a spontaneously formed group. By 'spontaneously formed group' I mean any group of people who get together voluntarily and of their own accord rather than who are put there by some agency outside their control, as in the case with school groups, business groups and professional groups. Though the principles of effective group facilitation can aid all groups and I hope would be properly supplied to groupings that aid people's development such as in the classroom, I am especially addressing myself here to 'spontaneous groups', because they are the ones I most like, respect and which I believe hold the key to our future.

Some Emerging Principles.

The principles that emerge from encounter and allied groups are not necessarily all relevant to all groups. In fact they should be used selectively because the inappropriate use of some of these principles - such as the disclosure of vulnerable feelings in a task oriented setting could adversely affect the self-esteem of its participants.

1. Everyone is responsible for himself and his actions. The leader may have more experience and may decide to function in a different manner from the other group members, or he may not, but in the issue of 'responsibility' he is equal to everyone and everyone is equal to each other and to him (or her). Nobody need let anything happen to him or her if it is unwanted. One may act to protect oneself or walk out.

Parenthetically, I would like to offer my definition of responsibility: 'Responsibility means the ability to respond to the consequences of one's actions.'

2. The leader is leader only in so far as people let him act that way and no-one supersedes his functions. Anything the leader does, anyone can do - give suggestions, ask someone to talk up, ask someone to be quiet, summarize positions, ask for a vote, adjourn the meeting or call for another meeting. Leadership is not a person but a series of group functions. One person may identify with the functions with or without the rest of the group agreeing, and/or group members can assume leadership functions on their own initiative, at most risking negative reactions from the rest. Freedom is the keynote. A respect for the group aim including the maintenance of this freedom, can be everyone's guide.

3. Some say mutual decision making produces the best group decisions. I say mutual decision making embodies 'the group's truth': votes, a quick nod of heads, or as in some spiritual groups, decisions in silence. Participants' decision making is shown by empirical studies to result in people more effectively carrying out these decisions; therefore it's practical as well as ethical.

4. Communication means disclosure of one's personal position. In encounter groups this means, 'Say how you feel!' 'Don't interrupt someone else.' In all groups it means, 'State your own position and your own stake in this matter. Don't go off into the airy fairies or conceal your needs by talking about someone else's.' To understand how this works, people should be aware of the difference between 'I' and 'You'. To freely express one's personal stake in a matter means to discount the pejorative 'selfish' and to take a 'Marxian' position regarding emotions. Each person centres his position from a point that discloses his self-interest and the feelings that self-interest engenders. This is known as simple frankness. To argue 'for the sake of others' as if one's interest were in total abeyance is a common form of hypocrisy nurtured by closed unit families which open and intelligent confrontation would soon dissolve. To take an interest in the welfare of others is always a proper extension of one's self interest since our lives are interlocked. 'I want' replaces 'You should'.

5. Obtain Feedback. Feedback is not interpretation. That's one of the hangups to unlearn. Feedback is, first and foremost, '*What you say and do makes me feel such-and-such*'. Interpretation is a secondary thought experience which discloses one's deductions of the other's patterns but, by itself, does not reveal the direct impact effect, and its value is thus secondary.

There are ways to put one's interpretations or 'my helpful thoughts about you' in a way that does work out. The first thing is to make clear it is an opinion and need not

be swallowed. The second is to try to link any idea to what is specifically seen or heard so the person you're talking to knows the data from which you've made your deduction. To give the 'seen or heard' data also shows that you've taken the trouble to be very alert and to articulate what you remember. This aids the experience of 'recognition' which is one of the aims of good contact. Then one more point: if one's 'ideas about you' are not specifically asked for, and when we think about it we see that they are most usually given though not asked for, it might first be helpful to ask the person, 'Do you want to hear my ideas about you?' If the answer is 'Yes' then you can be sure that the offering of your ideas will be helpful, even if totally disagreed with.

6. No matter how negative the starting point, end up 'positively'. In terms of emotions, the final transformation should be to warmth and affection; in terms of thinking, the final thought should be positive in two senses: definitive (clear-cut) and positively valued; in terms of task groups, a specific, well-demarcated, positive action plan should be ratified.

7. Use of the body. Whenever possible, use the body - in awareness for action, and for contact among people. To use the body is to stoke the coal of the furnace; the heat given off will help everything else happen.

8. Use exercises. There are exercises for non-verbal communication. There are exercises for verbal communication. Exercises for positive body control. Exercises for negative body contact which stay safe. Exercises for 'here and now'. Exercises for elsewhere like fantasy, and making up and enacting group stories. Or creating 'new families' exercises. Exercises to follow through for full expression. Exercises to teach you to 'disobey'. Unstructured situations for free play so that you can spontaneously create and follow through on your own exercises. The work can grow in crescendo. The leader helps people make full use of their energies and impulses, so that the energies aroused find media for gratifying and creative control.

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## AARON ESTERSON

### INTERVIEWED BY ANDREW ROSSABI I

*Why is there such widespread interest in madness and schizophrenia at the present time?*

I suppose the work on schizophrenia, especially in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, which shows in a very dramatic way something that occurs in all of us, which is the conditioning and mystifications that people practise quite unwittingly on one another, particularly parents on their children. That's my guess why these books are so popular. People recognise so much of themselves in these descriptions. I'm not saying it is exactly the same, it isn't. These families show it up more intensely, there is a significant difference in the intensity of it. But the kind of thing that goes on is similar, it's on the continuum of mystification as goes on with so many other people. That's my guess. You'd have to ask why people read these books, what they get from reading them.