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THE GROUP EXPERIENCE

Groups are changing the face of this country. If we learn quickly enough to rearrange our circumstances so that we may survive the destructive forces of our planet, then they may help change the face of the earth.

We are alienated when we have no groups to which we feel we belong. When we create groups for belonging, when we can discover our deepest longings for communal contact are satisfied by a group presence, then we are no longer alienated from our own need to be at one and at peace with other human beings.

The nature of group life so far provided by the institutions of our civilisation frustrate that need for belonging at its very root. The trust, vulnerability, personal appreciation and circumstances needed for creative enactment are all missing in the group life opportunities offered by accredited impersonal institutions. So we must discredit those accreditations and see what 'new groups' can give us - new groups spontaneously founded by our creative selves, new groups which give satisfaction to our needs to personally shape our situation and in that way let us further shape ourselves.

My fear of groups

I have felt frightened of groups for as long as I am able to remember. My heart typically beats hard, my skin gets clammy, my throat dry. I notice that I tremble, and if I try to speak out and over this upsurge of 'fear', then I might betray myself with embarrassment and reveal to others the quavering in my voice that I would rather subdue. So I try to speak firmly, loudly, and carry my phrase through before my body vibration gets the best of my words to stop and clog me in mid-sentence. It's like a race and I must say I've lost it several times, to be doused in the shame of my incompleting endeavour. Once I sat in front of an audience and couldn't talk at all for 25 minutes.

So why do I go on leading groups? As a friend once remarked, '*When the monster is chasing you, you can suddenly turn and run right back into the monster.*' And I have.

This monster of fearfulness toward speaking up in a group is a very interesting creature. At one time I accepted the psychoanalytic interpretation offered - that it was my 'latent hostility' - I would now call it my 'pissed-offness' - that aroused my anxiety; and this seemed to fit my experience since in those days I usually had something aggressive to say to a group when I raised my hand. Sometimes I would hedge and qualify my remarks so as not to seem too aggressive. In a sense, this even more deeply justified the psychoanalytic interpretation that my pounding heart, when about to speak to a group, was due to unexpressed anger. However, I now see that

anxiety, which the Gestaltists correctly call 'excitement', even though it may be disquieting, is due to suppressed emotionality. In other words, the anxiety-excitement did not necessarily connect to any particular quality of feeling, but represented an arousal of general feelingfulness, or what might be termed 'the unformulated impulse'. The stirring up of unformulated impulse comes from the group attention. To experience another person's apparent attention to oneself always raises one's feeling of energy, and to experience a whole group of people attending to oneself heightens this energy still more.

The heightening and lowering of one's energy as related to the intensity and quality of attention one receives from others is an important principle of emotional change. Warm, accepting attention increases self-warmth, its loss brings coldness or emptiness. Critical attention brings discomfort, its removal brings relief. The multiplicity of attention one receives from a group can heighten all these experiences.

This hypothesis - that group attention arouses feelings, though not necessarily any one quality of feeling, and that 'stage fright' or anxiety in front of a group represents an accumulation of 'too much feeling', though here too it is feelingfulness rather than one specific feeling that is overtly aroused - is supported by the following observations:

When I came to lead groups, and joined other leaders' groups, which I liked and appreciated, and nonetheless found my anxiety experience mounting at the onset of every group session, no matter what the quality of feeling seemed to be, I just began to wonder. I didn't believe I was angry, and yet I still felt uptight. Then I noticed how other people appeared anxious too, I observed how people who showed this blanket of anxiety lost it as soon as they began to do things - talk continuously, get up and move around, deep breathe, anything active. I also noticed that whatever a person did while anxious - so long as the action could be carried through and not stopped by the paralytic effect of the fear feeling - would have a certain special gusto or zest. This confirmed for us that the anxiety was an 'energy phenomenon' representing 'too much feeling' but not a particular feeling. The fact that any action which is carried through will evaporate the anxiety supports the notion that the original anxiety represents 'undifferentiated feelings', in other words, 'unformulated impulses' which are stirred up by the group's attention.

This increase in one's energy resulting from the group's attention is one of the keys to a group's effectiveness. The heightened feelings in a group setting permit the arousal of one's deepest feelings, including what is most troublesome, and the opportunity is given to work out the problem so long as the group is trustworthy. Some people are saying today that it is only in groups that one's deepest turmoils can be worked out. This may be going too far - in fact, the ethic of the new therapies is that there's got to be room for everything. But to restate the point, groups are especially effective because there is a heightened energy experience which hinges on members receiving the group's attention. At the same time, this heightened energy can at first be experienced as highly unpleasurable, that is as anxiety. Previous experiences with groups - in the family, the classroom, the office - have led most of us to feel distrustful toward any new group. That can lead to anxiety. Also, to just have 'more feelings' can be uncomfortable, as if our bodies are not yet used to *channelling heightened feelings, or containing them in comfort.*

Group Attention Stirs Up Feelingfulness

An experiment that highlights the group energy process: I once asked people in an ongoing group who were pretty used to each other, '*Who feels a bit dead and would like to be livened up without any effort, without having to do anything?*'

After a few moments, one slumped fellow grudgingly nodded and shrugged his shoulders, as if to say, '*What's the use, it doesn't matter.*'

I said, '*Let's all just look at Mike.*'

We did, and we did; and as we did, he slumped deeper, and he began to rock and began to smile, and began to shift; and he began to rock more, and wrung his hands and peeked up at us, and then down, and then he shifted about restlessly, aimlessly, as if he wanted to crawl out of his skin like a leper, and finally he told us to cut it out.

'Embarrassment!' one may interpret. But that misses the point. To identify an internal feeling does not explain the interpersonal process. Mike's experience of the group's attention heightened his feeling or 'energy' state. In this case we might say his flush of feeling is called shame or embarrassment. In other cases, a group's attention can stir up fear, anger, gladness or joy. Fundamentally, the interpersonal phenomenon in which I experience your attention feels to me as though it gives us energy, and the loss of your attention makes me feel I lose energy. To gain or lose energy as we become closer or more distant - physically and in terms of attentiveness - is the fundamental relationship energy that we must tolerate in loving.

Let's Cut School to Get Together.

The central claim for groups is not just that they heighten energy experience, but they can potentially change our lives and the fabric of society. The point about heightened group energy is that this gives a group the power to facilitate changes.

For most of us, group experience in the classroom, the office the shop floor and the quick coffee-break in between have been typically unsatisfactory. It is especially in the classroom that people will inevitably get smashed. John Holt's book *How Children Fail* gives epic examples already widely quoted. The school problem consists of an authoritarian structure with 'teacher up front', thirty or more kids crammed together so there's no room for everybody up front, the competition to cultivate an 'I win, you lose' attitude, the syllabus to perpetuate irrelevancy and ignorance. What's missing? Everything - group decision-making, dancing, acting, running around, making a lot of noise, small group initiated projects and just room for personal initiative.

The problem in today's social life is not just that we've had these early bad group experiences, but that we've had little opportunity to correct them. The architecture of our homes, box on box in the city or box by box if you've made it out - carves our isolation.

There is some pleasurable grouping today. Poor people have neighbourhoods and the local bar. Richer people have parties. Some of it is all right or even pretty good. Writers like Updike show it's not all wine and roses, but affection is shared. Nevertheless, I want to keep painting a black picture because in terms of the

possibilities, even those who are having very nice times could have it better, and the vast majority are not living in loving communalism with others, whether they know it or not.

Another issue is the ethical one. Good groups are both for nice times of sharing and also for positive action. Given the current debilitated and debilitating circumstances of the world, of which nations and institutions are part and parcel, spontaneous groups will be needed to make a dent. Spontaneous groups are needed to share intimacy and to try to change the world. The rudiments are already forming; encounter groups teach about intimacy. Other longer lasting groups help people share. Women's Lib and Gay Lib are coming to the fore to try to change the social and political scene, and this is best done when sharing intimacy and affection are part of the work which they are also attempting. There are many companion Liberation groups including groups organised to save the ecology of our planet. These are all spontaneous groups to share love in just being together and acting with relevance.

This article has been extracted from a forthcoming book to be published under the title *THE NEW THERAPIES, FREE TO HEAL*.



The Fight (picture by George Salomides). *'Perhaps we should balance the Epic Drama approach with something on a smaller scale, that has direct impact on the lives of the members of the class'*. Sue Jennings, *THE PLACE OF DRAMA IN EDUCATION: Self & Society* No.7 September 1973.