

Alan Emmerson

An Open Air Community

Some of the people reading this magazine might be interested in a community experience which we take part in.

I would like to write about it to help settle and absorb some of my personal experiences. What we're doing is a continuing process. We are not aiming to teach - we reckon we have nothing to teach - we are hoping to learn: each of us to learn from our experience of the others, and our experience of their experience of ourselves. But *really*, not theoretically or intellectually, in words. You can't pin down a continuing process without killing it, and some of the fastest pins are the loaded key-words which get sprinkled through magazines and journals like '*Self & Society*' - words which once gave us flashes of insight because they represented gut feelings we were experiencing at the time (and/or still do) but which become abstracted from the living experience - debased currency through inflated use.

For instance, my use of the word 'community'. What we aim to bring together, say for a fortnight in the summer, or a week at Easter, is a small tribal community of 60/80 people, most of whom will not have known each other before. The bringing together of these people is done in a highly structured manner, based on 25 years of developing experience.

Some for instances. We aim to have an equal number of each sex. We aim to have about a dozen in each age group of 6½ to 8 years old, 8 to 10, 11 to 12, 13 to 14, and 15 to 17, and a balance of about 16/20 people in a 'grown-ups' group, ages from 17 upwards to 80 (our oldest so far).

These structures are aims, we don't stick to them rigidly. Another important thing we try to do is to draw people together from all over the country, and not just the big conurbations.

The focus of activity is a basic 'wilderness' camping community, established for the week or fortnight on an isolated site, the main requirements of which are, after isolation, a supply of drinkable water and a source of wood supply.

Each lodge develops in its own way. Experience has shown that certain ways of organizing to meet the basic requirements of living together - preparation of food, for instance - tend to work best ('best' in terms of community experience, that is, not best in terms of organization and method), and over the years these experiences lay down a pattern of routines, but each and every tradition is there to be changed or broken. There are many threads of experience and attitude running through what takes place within this structured context, and the ones I will pick out are the ones that mean most to me.

1) We consciously and deliberately place ourselves in a primitive situation, where we are forced to pay attention to basic biological requirements. Two examples of many that could be spelled out. *Shelter*. We live in small lightweight tents. We experience directly wind, rain, cold. We win our victories in terms of experiencing warmth, and dryness, usually by how we act directly, on our situation and not through the agency of complicated instruments and mysterious technology. Our bonuses are enhanced and deepened experiences of so much we take for

granted, and so much that is there continuously to be experienced but which we 'normally' are completely unaware of. The sun, a blue sky, a calm day. *Shitting*. No longer a matter of sitting on a plastic seat over an enamelled bowl with a cistern full of water to slush everything away to who-knows-where. A trench to be dug, not too wide to make squatting uncomfortable or impossible, the earth to be carefully piled to be used to cover up and prevent flies transmitting unwanted bugs, a small trowel to scoop the earth, (not too much, otherwise another trench will have to be dug before the end of camp), a tin to keep the bog-roll dry, and so on and so on. In other words, like the mynah birds in 'Island' - attention, attention. Not only is this the experience of evacuating the bowels in the position most suited to our body structure, but we relate a basic and fundamental human activity (everyone shits, throughout their life) to such things as its social situation (keep the paper dry for those who follow, keep the flies away from the shit) and its ecological context.

The examples can go on and on.

My point is that there is a deep human need to discard sophistication (if only for a time) and complication, and 'here and now' is not only a technique to be used in reciting your dreams to your encounter therapist but a way of being in the world - everywhere you are is 'here', always is 'now'. It helps to start the process of lifting yourself up by your own bootlaces if you drop a whole heap of material attachments.

2) What has been described above could apply to the tramp or the mountain climber. It's only one thread. Another is that these experiences take place with others.

I have the opinion that who 'I am' is to a large extent (maybe totally) what I experience others to believe me to be. O.K. One ought to use words like 'dialectic', 'gestalt', but let the statement

alone for the moment. What I experience at these camps is something interesting and I think important. I find that the various 'roles' I habitually assume, without thought, get knocked sideways. This also happens to everyone else. Therefore we begin to interact in a way that is new and fresh to each of us.

Not only are the external trappings missing or greatly discounted (my trendy town-house, my bowler hat or artist smock,) and not only are my more intangible props missing, (knowing the meaning of 'ontological insecurity' and 'existential dilemma' doesn't help get a fire lit), but more significantly my roles as parent/child, teacher/taught, worker/boss, either don't apply or become very difficult to maintain. My opinion is that this is largely due to the age range of the lodge, and the geographical catchment area of the people. If I am twelve years old, forced by law to go to school, where having failed my 11+ or its equivalent I am classed as 'non-academic', from a home where my father, who works hard in a car factory to keep up the instalment payments and gets tired and irritable with my mother and shouts at her a lot, and so on and so on - in other words I am not yet classified as 'delinquent', 'remedial', 'psychotic' but am just straight, grey and have a dull time altogether, what I find when I arrive at the camp is that nobody knows about any of this, and we are all so busy doing crazy things like chopping wood, or singing stupid songs round a fire at night that we never get round to finding out about it. I then find out that not all grown-ups shout and carry on, like Dad and the teachers. Them not being so scary, I find that I can talk to them about the things I find interesting, and so I am interesting too. Also with the other people of my age I find I'm someone special when it comes to building and lighting a fire, although perhaps I can't fry eggs very well, and no one knows how much the bullies at school scare me because there are no bullies here, except perhaps that kid who tried a bit of aggro

but I didn't let him get away with it, or not all that much so perhaps I'm not such a creep after all.

And those eight-year olds are a bit of a drag except I did enjoy helping them build that dam and when they were messing about at the end trying to break it down I liked it when me, Superman, with one mighty leap, flew through the air and 'pow', burst the dam covering everyone with mud, and no Mum to fuss about 'look at your clothes' and all that. . . .

So what? So these situations are happening to everyone and all the time. Not idyllic, not all happiness, not all love and peace, but sometimes, and those 'sometimes' are sometimes the only times, or the first times for a long time for some of us. And when some of us are not just straight, grey, and dull, but are classified as 'remedial', 'E.S.N.', ex-psychiatric hospital cases or potential ones, 'failures' as parents proved by our divorce, or the rejection of us by 'our' children, these experiences can start the process of bootlace lifting, or reinforce a process already started.

The example given at length above is meant to show that in this temporary tribal lodge community these experiences relate not only to our peer group but also to those older and those younger than ourselves, by which I mean not just years of age, but those who are where we might be going and those who are where we might have come from. The here and now of ourselves includes the here and now of our future selves, sort of, and the here and how of our past selves, sort of.

3) Well there is a 3) and a 4) but I'll stick at just two, because it occurs to me that what I am doing is abstracting, and in an intellectual way, aspects of a total situation which needs to be experienced.

These camps are organised by a group called Forest School Camps. Everyone connected with the camps will agree that

it is difficult if not impossible to describe what we 'do', what we 'stand for', or where and when the magic begins to work, but for a lot of people it does undoubtedly work. The programme mounted by F.S.C. has reached its maximum expansion possible without employing full-time workers and formalising procedures, which would be to kill them. For various historical reasons, F.S.C. draws its support mainly from middle-class and professional families. A number of us, with the blessing and support of the parent body, want to share our experiences with working-class people, and last year and this year we ran camps where the younger ones were working-class, but the grown-ups were your usual middle-class drop-outs. However, that is where we are.

So far as possible, and it is difficult, we try to eliminate attitudes of patronage in what we are doing, and to help this along we are trying to recruit directly from friends and from people we work with in community action groups. We are trying to by-pass supportive social welfare agencies, who often support their 'clients' like a rope supports a hanging man.

I doubt if many readers of *Self & Society* are working-class, although some, like myself, may have origins and roots there. If there are, they will know and have felt directly that extra put-down that bourgeois society lays on them and children, women and black people as well. If anyone is working with self-liberation groups such as the N.U.S.S., Women's Lib., Claimants Union, PROP, Young Panthers, and particularly if they live and work outside of London, we would like to hear from you.

The camps, (we are thinking of calling them Flysheet Camps,) have no ideology, there just isn't time for it. They also have no money, so everyone who comes pays the same. (This doesn't apply to FSC). So we don't have very much to offer, perhaps just our need of your need of our need.