

AP Activities

HOW TO BE SPONTANEOUS WITHOUT DRIVING EVERYONE CRAZY

One of the first problems people seem to come up against when they start getting into humanistic psychology is the question of spontaneity.

In encounter groups, or through the other ways of getting into this area, people learn to be open and honest. But when they try to apply this kind of approach outside the encounter group, trouble often starts. The whole film *Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice* is about the complications caused by people trying to be open and honest in their personal relationships.

One way of avoiding the problem is by behaving one way in the encounter group, and another way outside. This seems much easier, and fits in to our usual way of behaving, which is to have a fresh mask for every occasion. And it can be justified by saying to oneself 'These encounter people can't really expect me to say just what I feel in everyday life - it's just not practical, and it certainly wouldn't be kind or tactful.'

But the encounter people do ask for just that. At least one does, Will Schutz, who says:

'Open encounter' refers not only to the specific situation of an encounter group, but also to a way of being with people outside any deliberate setting. I regard it as the ultimate application of the encounter group: normal social relations which have the openness and honesty, and spontaneity and affection, the directness and clarity that can be attained now in encounter groups.

So we cannot evade the challenge by merely pretending that it is not there.

The classic case that seems to bother us most is the situation where someone annoys us and we feel like snapping out something destructive. Do we follow our feelings? And if so, how do we stop an escalation of destruction?

Let's suppose we do feel something like this. Spear, a follower of Carl Rogers, says that there are four levels of communication which we can use. *Level 1* is the lowest and the least adequate, the most harmful; it is to say nothing. If we say nothing, the distance between us and the other person has increased, without him or her knowing, and it is not possible for anything better to happen, except by accident. *Level 2* is slightly better - we say something like - 'You are a pain in the neck'. This is at least some form of communication - there is something here which can be worked on in some way. But all it does is to hang a large label round the neck of the person, which usually has the effect of making the person more defensive, or arousing hostility

often both together. It is the kind of judgement which pretends to impartial objectivity - we came along and just happened to notice this very obvious label round the person's neck and drew attention to it. So we have placed ourselves outside the situation, and therefore outside any criticism in return. This is a rotten basis for communication. *Level 3* is better again; we say something like - 'You give me a pain in the neck'. Here we have admitted that we are part of the situation too. But our involvement is pretty minimal - we have experienced something, but all the responsibility for it remains with the other person. It is all his or her fault. This again will in most cases produce defensiveness, and reduced communication. *Level 4* is the best we can do; we say something like - 'When you said (did) that I felt my stomach turning over, and a sort of hot flush came right up my throat into my face; I felt really angry at you.' All of this communication is about *us*. And it is then open to the other person to say - That's your problem! Or it can be ignored. Or the other person can say - Was it something I did? - and start to examine it. It is being *more* open and honest than the other three levels - it is revealing more about us and not putting it all on to the other - but it is *less* hurtful.

Now there is nothing mechanical about this Level 4 communication - it is in fact very difficult to do - Barry Stevens describes it from the inside:

'The place I have to begin is, it's no good pretending that I'm not annoyed. When I notice that I'm pretending, and remove myself from that dishonesty, then I am free to notice that I feel like snapping . . . But if I notice that I feel like snapping and snap, as the snapping people do, then I have not noticed myself in a way that brings about a basic change. My noticing that I want to snap has to be simple acceptance of that fact, without opinion . . . When I notice my irritation in this inward way, something changes. I don't know anything about brain circuits, but I must be able to use a switch in some way, because when I have done this noticing, even if I say the same words I might have said otherwise, they don't sound the same, the sound is part of the message.'

She gives some examples of this. The point is, that there is a tiny pause, while our attention is turned inward, to find out where we are at, how we are actually feeling.

When I first told people about this, the first person I told said - 'That doesn't sound very spontaneous to me!' And that really worried me for quite a while, because I saw what he meant. But then I came across a distinction between spontaneity and impulsiveness, which seems to me to answer this question and to add something important. When we act impulsively, we act on the salient bit of the situation, the bit which stands out at the moment; it is a *partial* reaction to *one part* of the event. But when we act spontaneously, we act on the *whole* situation, with our *whole* self. Our rejection comes out, but our love comes out too; the foreground is set in its background.

And that is the function of the tiny pause for turning inward - it is the necessary process of bringing out the *other* relevant bits of ourselves and the situation, so that they can *all* play their own part in the sound and the sense of what we say.

When I first tried this, I was just amazed. Someone who had always irritated me was irritating me again, and I was opening my mouth to put him down. And then I remembered, and took a moment to register what I was actually feeling at that moment; what I said was almost exactly the same as what I would have said anyway, and what I had said ineffectually many times before, but somehow it did sound different, and his reaction was totally different - for the first time we were really communicating on the same level.

Try it. Maybe you can be open and honest - and spontaneous - after all!

The Spear article I think was in A.G. Athos & R.E. Coffey, *Behaviour in Organizations: A multi-dimensional view*, Prentice-Hall 1968.

Quotes are from William C. Schutz, *Here comes Everybody*, Harper & Row 1971, and Carl R. Rogers & Barry Stevens (eds) *Person to person: The problem of being human*, Real People Press 1967. See also Barry Stevens, *Don't push the river*, Real People Press 1970.

You are invited to find out how humanistic psychology helps to generate a way of life, not only for the person himself in his own private psyche, but also for the same person as a social being, a member of society.

The subscription is £6 per year, which includes a subscription to *Self & Society*, or £4 for mailing members. Mailing members receive *Self & Society* and all communications from the AHP and will be entitled to attend all meetings but without discounts.

To: The Treasurer, Association for Humanistic Psychology,
62 Southwark Bridge Road, London SE1 0AU.

I would like to join the AHP in Britain, and enclose my first year's subscription.

NAME

ADDRESS

.....

.....

OCCUPATION

QUALIFICATIONS

.....