

Mari Kuttna

In and Out of encounter

I've tried Growth Groups several times, always under the same leader, whom I like very much. But nothing can ever compare to the excitement of my first, one-day introductory meeting. It was almost like falling in love.

Like everyone else, I was nervous and shy, and I felt that the seriousness of experienced participants was a condemnation of the frivolity with which I (and many other novices) masked nervousness. However, after two or three hours my confidence began to grow; the sub-groups were, by the time of the lunch-break, intensely friendly and loyal to each other. And I found non-verbal communication techniques a release from my verbiage-ridden professional and private life. At the end of the day, about six members of our sub-group decided to stay together for a drink and we formed what seemed to be incipient friendships. However, these petered out in a few months.

And yet, the great attraction of Encounter was the prospect of forming friendships in a new way. To make social contacts, to meet new people - many of them younger than myself, with fresh attitudes - whom I could meet on neutral ground, without the oppressive rituals of middle-class social life - the sherry before dinner, the hurriedly concocted pseudo-Cordon-Bleu entree, the tedious conversations about house prices, state versus public schools, au pairs and holiday plans. So I joined an on-going group as soon as I could free one evening a week. Not for therapy or liberation, but rather as joining a good new club.

This was a mistake, I suppose; although, in retrospect, it still managed to teach me a valuable lesson about myself. For I brought my social habits along to Encounter: nice manners, a polite interest in others, care not to hog the centre of attention (I have to draw on self-discipline for this, as I'm born limelight-seeker, and through professionally developed verbal skills, it is all too easy for me to oppress the shy and inarticulate.) Anyway, I was determined to be on my best behaviour in the on-going Encounter group; to observe and to 'fit in'.

A Fashion Note For Encounter

For people like me, 'fitting in' also involves being appropriately dressed. After giving some thought to the perfect Encounter Outfit, I arrived at: stretch denim jeans or trichel jersey trousers; as wool, corduroy or courtelle pick up fluff from floors and carpets . . . Then, a hiplength tunic of cotton jersey or towelling, with a zip front. No buttons that could come off, no hooks to scratch, no press studs to pop open. Nothing ticked-in that could (and always does) work loose. No traps to slip, no skirts to ride up, no gaping necklines to show unintentional bras. The result of all this attention to detail, which included briefs to match the trousers - in case those non-verbal group exercises split a seam or two - was that after each session, no matter how energetic or gymnastic, the cunning simplicity of my garments retained their band-box look. At first, I was quite pleased about this.

I was also proud of not drawing attention to myself. During the boring bits, I contemplated my carefully painted toenails and matching fingernails or studied the other girls present. Some of them were beautiful. I have never, until then, or even perhaps until now, gone into a room of men and women without automatically establishing my private pecking-order of sex-appeal for both; and assigning myself somewhere on the scale between the prettiest and plainest. However, I have long since learnt that a woman's assessment of any other woman's attraction is always misled, mistaken and self-centred. We like best those who look like improved versions of ourselves. So, one can then start a new game: how would a man see us? How would any of the men rate the women present? In other words, whenever I failed to participate in the games around me, I played games with myself - as one would during the boring moments of any social situation. But how could I expect to form friendships while I was doing this?

Breakthrough Of Feeling

In these ten sessions of my phoney sociability, there was one breakthrough of real feeling. There was a woman of my own age in the group who had a weight problem. Now, this is something I share. For three years out of four I am fat - but I am always a thin girl who is temporarily fat. This is not a problem which crops up all that often in Encounter groups, for fat women are, by and large, afraid of the physical emphasis of Encounter. They find it difficult to sit on the floor; they hate the thought of being lifted, of being touched in play; while stripping is too serious a trauma altogether. They hate, and reject, their fatness and with fatness, their own bodies. So the presence of Leah (not her real name) was both unusual, and for her, a greater ordeal than she had foreseen.

Under the pressure of describing 'how do you feel now', Leah admitted to being depressed, to hating herself. The group rallied round with the usual bromides of 'but you are attractive - you are You - we all love you - everybody is beautiful' until Leah broke down and started sobbing. Perhaps because no one understood. Perhaps because everybody lied. It took all my courage to yell at the extremely beautiful, slim young man who proffered the most facile affection - 'Shut up! you are slim and beautiful and you can't possibly understand how we fat people can feel about ourselves, our bodies . . .' The group was disconcerted: that summer, I was not fat, and what spare tyres were left were camouflaged by the Encounter Gear described above. But I could utterly and completely identify with Leah. At first, she resented my intrusion into her private grief - to her, I appeared slim - but my verbalization of different aspects of her problem was useful to her; and we soon slid into co-counselling about topics like self-control, diets, gimmicks, weight watchers and so on until we utterly bored the rest of the group.

It was during the 'how do I see you' verbal exercise that I had my come-uppance. I think of myself as a fat earth-mother of a slob, with an aggressively critical mind. My husband frequently attacks me for my clumsiness; my friends for over-intellectualising. And here in this Encounter group, after being together for many hours, and

intimately, the others saw me as a Dresden figurine, a clockwork ballerina, a pink flower, a sugar-plum fairy and god knows what else: all symbols not of the female, but of the feminine, in the most novelettish terms. As I listened, it seemed to me that they were describing not me, but my graceful, actressish, over-feminine mother.

It was a blinding revelation. In the process of growing up, of adjusting to the demands of a sexist society, now that I reached the age my mother was when I first took notice of her - I had become my mother.

But, I told myself, it's not too late; I can still back-pedal and let people see the troubled, vulnerable, sincere person that I really am. (Is there anyone in this whole wide world who does not think of himself or herself as troubled, vulnerable, and sincere?) Anyway, next autumn I enrolled in another group, and I resolved there to be myself. To show what I felt, even if it was only boredom; not to try to be attractive or pleasant, not to win hearts or charm people; just see what I could learn. Just relax and let it wash over me.

It was terribly boring. Without my private game of appealing to a diversity of tastes, there was nothing much to do. In any case, it was a less successful group all round - too large, less homogeneous in outlook and education. The exercises repeated those of the earlier group, but people held back and, on being examined for 'how you feel now', refused to be drawn out or else, became exhibitionistic. After four or five sessions I dropped out. Besides, I was beginning to put on weight again. Problems of growth or fulfilment are dwarfed by the daily, hourly battle against over-eating. My one free evening a week is now devoted to the meetings of weight watchers, where there are thirty to fifty women exactly like Leah and me, who found that humanistic psychology seldom enters the field of obsessions and compulsions. But we all hope that somewhere, somehow, we shall find some conundrum, even some Eysenckian conditioning machine, to enable us all to cope once and for all with the self-destroying curse of bread, cakes, biscuits, bananas, chocolates, peanuts, wine, whisky or almond fudge.

WOODEN HORSE

All day long

Voices have beaten about me -

Spear-blows

On the side of the Wooden Horse.

R.G. Hampson