

Jerome Liss

## Encounter for loneliness and the need for change

The encounter group and its allies, psychodrama, Gestalt, Bio-energetics and other 'new groups' have finally given people a chance to discover new levels of intimacy and contact. The social need for such groupings is because too many people have broken relationships in our society of flux, as elaborated in Albert Teffler's *Future Shock!* The experience of loneliness is a key motivation for a person willing to risk vulnerability and shame in order to try out an encounter group.

Carl Rogers, perhaps the most influential 'therapist' in American society today, has stated: '*Workshops seem to be at least the partial answer to loneliness of modern man and his search for new meanings for his life.*'

For the lonely person, the group provides an experience of 'instant intimacy'. Because most workshops are still weekend episodes to introduce people to the experience, they do not offer its participants sustained follow-up nourishment. But as people's need for this intimacy grows or, to put it otherwise, as people's awareness for their need for intimacy grows, then groups will meet more regularly; or, more likely, since the encounter group focusses on intimacy and emotional disclosure, and neglects 'tasks' like setting up communes, taking political action, enhancing family interaction, finding meaningful work, playing and dancing, I believe the sustained groups that will crop up will focus on such projects using people's encounter experiences to set new standards for intimacy and simultaneously realise them.

But loneliness is not the only need. Many people have to get away from their ongoing relationships to take another look at themselves and re-evaluate their lives. One gets stuck in ruts and no matter how trustworthy one's spouse or friends, the sense that alterations are needed will bring increasing numbers of people to groups in which one hopes one's need to trust will be satisfied.

The sense that one must change, for some a subtle intuition and for others a constant hammering at the head, is the distress which, if properly respected, can be the leverage for one to risk an initial group experience, and ultimately work for self transformation. The idea is to reject the superimposed dictum, 'Forget your troubles, dear' and get right down into the pain; only this time use it fruitfully to deepen awareness and act progressively. The opportunities are growing. People in social ruts are in a sense always lonely, lonely for their potentials which are unactualised. But potential needs media for actualisation, and to start off with the medium is other people in a situation of trust.

'Last Year My Husband Killed Himself.'

Sometimes a person may not even know he has been lonely until he comes to that experience in the group. In '*Encounter Groups!*' Rogers describes a gentleman who

suddenly comes to the gut-level experience of the feelings of isolation which he has concealed from himself. The description is as follows:

*'Jerry is a competent business executive. Somewhat puzzled by the statements of others in the group, he said in an early session: 'I look at myself with some strangeness because I have no friends, for example, and I don't seem to require friends.' In a later session, when he heard Beth, a married woman, talking of a remoteness she felt between herself and her husband and how much she craved a deeper and more communicative relationship, his face began to work and his jaw to quiver. Boz, another member of the group, went over and put her arm around him and he broke into uncontrollable sobs.'*

A person's social estrangement might be undisclosed until it bursts out into the group.

Barbara said to Frances, 'Frances, I wish I could be strong like you.'

Frances answered unexpectedly, 'Don't call me strong. Not now. Not now.'

Sylvia, the leader, said to Frances, 'Why do you say now? Perhaps you should close your eyes and fantasize. Tell me what you visualise, whatever comes into your head.'

Frances said an amorphous hodge podge of things to this.

One of the girls interrupted, 'Frances, I don't know what the hell you're talking about.'

Frances paused and swallowed: 'All right I'll tell you what I'm really talking about. Last April my husband killed himself and left me with seven children - and I can't go on. I don't have the strength to go on.' She put her head down on the sofa, sobbing convulsively.

One might easily imagine Frances' isolation from others and her burden of pent-up feelings which had boxed in her life until that point. Perhaps she has had other people with whom to cry and talk it out, but the chances are she hasn't. Does this represent a general cultural phenomenon? A woman who must raise children on her own with a pack of burdens from the past and a lonely life in the present? Many women are in that hole today. We know it. Many men too. Women need women's groups, the Women's Liberation Movement giving one such outlet for them. And lonely and troubled men need men's groups. and there's a Men's Liberation Movement afoot. And women and men need women's and men's groups together. What about a Women's and Men's Liberation?

To just meet together is not enough. We've got to use our skills and courage to make the group experience better than previous ones. Otherwise, the old patterns of distrust, bullshit talk, dominance and subservience, and all the old bad wash, froth up again.

What the encounter group experience offers is some guidelines for good communication. You are responsible only for yourself. Leadership functions should be shared. Put your feelings forward first. Then get feedback. End up positively. Use the body. Create exercises.

These ideas of good communication come from my workshop experiences. I offer them as much to be rejected as taken. I hope the literature on good communication

will grow, because really, who knows? The Synanon method for example, breaks all these principles, and they do miraculous things while having a great time. That's their beat.

We are involved in two intertwining processes: learning and healing. We are learning new things about ourselves, our bodies, our being with others. We are healing what hurts. It is the energy of past distress, re-aroused in the group and transformed into warmth, which spirits our vital function to enhance our learning and growth toward love.

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Max Praed

## Labelling

A young man at an open meeting of a growth centre said that no matter what anyone ever said or suggested to him, even though he recognised it was in his own interest, he always wanted to do or say the opposite. I said he was labelling himself 'contrasuggestible' and he said: 'No, you are labelling me contrasuggestible', and I said: 'No, you're labelling yourself contrasuggestible', and he said: 'No, you're trying to pin a label on me. *I'm not contrasuggestible!*' If I pin a label on myself and people recognise it, are they labelling me or merely receiving my message?

I remember also an incident that occurred at the first meeting of a study group at Tavistock. The consultant came in carrying a small traveller's clock, which he put on the floor in front of him, even though he was sitting opposite a clock on the wall in the same room. Towards the end of the meeting I said he had brought in this clock like a stethoscope, establishing his status as the consultant of the group. He didn't say anything at the time, but he didn't bring his clock to the next meeting and when I commented he said: 'Well, sometimes we learn too, you know'. I appreciated this a great deal. It's the only occasion all the Grubb and Tavistock study group meetings I have attended when a consultant acknowledged he had learned something from the group, and changed his behaviour accordingly.