

Marsha Forest

Fifteen women

Introduction

for some change occurs slowly . . . for me change came like a quick wave . . . a shock wave which altered my life . . .

it came on a rainy night in April while i was pouring tea . . . he began . . .

*while i was away at the conference
i met an old friend from graduate
school . . . i went to her room . . .
kissed her . . . i wanted to sleep
with her - but i didn't . . .*

i calmy kept pouring the tea . . . i still fully hearing what he was saying to me . . . he continued . . .

*i love you with all my heart but
my life seems to be drifting away
from me . . . i'm over thirty . . . life
is going by too fast . . . i need a
chance to find out where i'm at . . .
i know i want to see 'her' again . . .*

i mumbled some words . . . sat down and began to weep . . . he began to cry, too . . . words didn't seem to mean anything then . . . only our tears . . .

i think i must have known in that moment that my seven year marriage was over and that a new life was about to begin . . .

my life changed fast . . . about one month after this initial conversation i had left him, i had rented and furnished my very own apartment, i had been offered and had accepted an excellent job, and i was making my own friends for the first time in many years . . .

the next few months were the most painful and at the same time the most important in my twenty-nine years . . . although my husband had initiated the shock it was i who made the next quick move . . . once the door had opened a crack i decided to cross to the other side . . . i was scared and excited at the same time . . .

i came face to face with myself at last . . . i had been jolted into looking at the reality of my existence . . . i began to make important decisions on my own without anyone's permission . . . i became a woman instead of a dependent child . . .

it was an awakening . . . once asleep to my own inner core i began to see a vision of the human being i could be . . . i began on the path to find that person lying inside me . . .

one event which helped me gain important insights into myself was a weekend encounter group - 'Being A Woman' - the following is the story of this weekend group of the fifteen women who participated . . .

'Being A Woman'

it began in the blue room of a motel near the university . . . the drive there was terrible . . . a surprise snowstorm . . . my contact lenses blurred the already wet vision and my iced windshield wipers made visibility almost impossible . . . in the past i would never have driven alone on a night like this . . . either my husband would have taken me or i would have stayed home . . . i felt good knowing i could handle the car myself in these rough conditions . . . i felt confident and capable as i entered the blue room . . .

i was one of the first to arrive . . . i enjoyed watching a series of wet people coming in the door . . . everyone was united by a common experience - the storm . . . the snow acted as a unifying force and brought us together . . . fifteen women . . . we sat on the floor in a circle . . . waiting . . .

Lyn introduced herself . . . she was the leader for this experience . . . a thin shapely woman with an alert intelligent face . . . she explained her goals and philosophy for the weekend . . . to me she appeared calm and confident . . . she told us that this wasn't a therapy group . . . it was an experience that would hopefully open up doors . . . it was a short term encounter group that would allow us to glimpse what lay inside each of us . . . for some it might be painful . . . she welcomed ideas, suggestions, and leadership . . . we were beginning . . .

- think of a name you want for these three days - get in touch with a name - with the process it takes to choose it - silence . . . i thought about it . . . - i'll stick with my own name - that's who i want to be - me - Marsha - we went around the circle . . . Lyn chose the name Rosalind . . . her mother's name . . . another became the authoress Anais Nin while a sad-faced young woman tried the name Joy . . .

i was impressed . . . everyone seemed so open and honest . . . people chose names and shared their reasons . . . i began to feel more relaxed . . . there was no pressure to perform . . . nothing was compulsory . . . i admitted to the group that at another time i might want to 'try on' a new name . . . at that moment i still couldn't give up Marsha . . . at first i thought anyone who wanted a new name must be frightened or insecure . . . why be another person i wondered . . . i realized then that i am the one who is frightened and insecure . . . what i had thought about others i was really thinking about myself . . .

women are . . . what are women anyway . . . why have an all - women group . . . Lyn tacked large sheets of white paper on the wall . . . we began to write words that expressed our feelings about women . . .

earth	human	pretty
soft	full of potential	sensitive
flexible	capable	good
light	generative	deep
quick	versatile	interesting
mothers	people	unpredictable
water	strong	sensual
verbal	soft	intuitive
vulnerable	flexible	beautiful
giving	questioning	round
pliant	attempting	green
earthy	gossipy	confused
wise	trustworthy	capable
comfortable	lifegiving	defensive
bitchy	nurturing	secret
afraid	controlled	compassionate
human beings	powerful	resourceful

what about men . . . groans . . . laughs . . . soon everyone was on their feet again
writing words about men . . . i had trouble separating my 'special' man out from men
in general . . . we wrote - men are . . .

human beings	soft	wrong
selfish	gentle	big
manipulating	fat	fun
frightening	confused	difficult
love	like mountains	smart
pain	strong	thick
tears	tough	bastards
my need	possesive	generous
my fear	longing	aggressive
power-driven	pretentious	actors
infuriating	actors	selfish
needy	little boys	vain
bullying	hard	heavy
intelligent	desirable	objective
ego-centered	people	insecure
loving	giving	emotional

convinced of their superiority
unable to control anger
drill ye tarriers drill and blast and fire
single minded and persevering
fishermen casting out lines alone on the sea and coming back half drowned
obtuse and insensitive
strong, durable, with deep roots
tender like a hand
bristle

Lyn next gave each of us a white card . . . this part was the hardest . . . 'i am' statements . . . silence . . . everyone was quiet . . . i could only hear fifteen pencils moving on fifteen pieces of paper . . . i wrote . . .

i am sweating
i am a woman
i am happy
i am in love
i am sexual and sensual
i am expanding
i am becoming myself
i am accepting myself
i am taking off my armor
i am opening new doors
i am learning to be free
i am liberating me . . .

anyone who wanted read their statements . . . i shared my list . . . i was quite moved by the intensity of feeling in the circle . . . someone noticed that almost everyone had left the word intelligent off their lists . . . wasn't it acceptable for women to be intelligent she wondered . . . i thought about that . . . i had not included it in my list either . . .

i am confused
i am tormented
i am afraid to love
i am afraid of sex -

Natalie read these sentences in a quaking voice . . . she spoke of the problem garden within her . . . would her garden grow into flowers or weeds . . . would she one day have to rip the thorns out by their roots or would they just disappear . . . she stopped and sighed . . .

i am energy going forward
i am a movie screen
i am lights and action

some lists were full of energy and life . . . others were filled with sadness . . . all were filled with feeling . . .

i learned something important during this time . . . before sharing my list i made some 'cute' comments and laughed nervously . . . someone called my attention to this . . . you don't have to apologize for what you say said Beth . . . just say it . . . that's right i thought . . . i'm always apologizing for myself . . . i want to express myself openly . . . what i have to say is as worthwhile as anyone else . . . i made a promise to work on that at home, at work, all over . . .

*Although the narrow corridor appears
So short, the journey took me twenty years,*

As he travelled along the corridor he found all his habits were obstacles. He tried to find answers in the mind. 'I groped to find a handle in my mind', but although he could see the corridor clearly enough he 'doubted it was there': you can't see anything with the mind alone. Finally, he decided his 'cause lay in the will that opens straight upon an act'. He found the handle of another room 'a simple handle found' and walked straight in. And there he found the same room, described in the first verse . . . 'a glass bell loaded with grapes and pears, a polished table . . .' All that effort - and for what? The answer is in the last verse -

*Much like the first, this room in which I went.
Only my being there is different. .*

Life is understood in action, in movement, moving 'straight upon an act', willing yourself through your actions to be what you are, thinking in action. This, although you may be in the same place, doing more or less what you have always done, the difference is you have chosen to be *there* - you have opened the door and you are fully awake.

everyone sat up . . . we shared our feelings of being alone with our own hands and then reaching out for another . . . Karen told the group that her left hand did one kind of movement while her right hand did the opposite . . . she reflected that this reminded her of how she often acted . . . one part of her going one way another part going the opposite direction . . . she was often confused she said . . . Betty wondered if what she was feeling was 'right' . . . there is no one right or wrong way to act someone told her . . . i always need so much approval she answered . . . just like me i thought . . . i realized again how much approval i needed . . . from my mother . . . from other authority figures . . . i shared these thoughts . . . many felt the same way . . . we all agreed we especially wanted approval from men . . . we also all agreed that we needed more confidence in ourselves and less approval from others . . . one good lesson i learned . . . everytime i want to ask a question i will try to turn it into a statement . . . ex: can i go now? vs. i want to go now . . . what a difference . . . i can make demands on my environment . . . instead of being the passive receiver i will be the active passer . . . i'm feeling very excited . . . stronger . . .

Lyn asked everyone to lie down on the rug . . . i want to lead you on a 'water fantasy' she told us . . . i found a cosy spot, made myself comfortable, closed my eyes and got prepared for this new voyage . . . i had read about fantasies but had never experienced one . . . the music began . . .

i became a floating raindrop
i traveled far from the blue room out
under the huge sky
i swiftly floated away along the snow filled
roads into a lake - to a river - and finally
through a whirling pool into the mammoth

ocean of my life
i traveled through distant lands and landed
on yet unknown shores.

i went from liquid into a teardrop
a drop of water from my own eyes
a crystal drop reflecting the pain and
sorrows of my life
also the tears of laughter and of joy
i glanced through the teardrop and saw myself
i evaporated and came back into the raindrop
i could not be stopped
liquid again i continued my voyage until the
music ended.

when the music ended everyone lay in silence each with her own thoughts . . . very slowly we formed our circle again and began to tell of our individual journeys . . . i was reticent to share my trip because i felt it was my own private odyssey . . . after hearing from some others i did share mine . . . everyone enjoyed my story . . . had i wanted to keep it private to protect myself . . . it felt good to hear the others respond to me . . . Jane told me she thought it was super that i felt confident enough to evaporate and then return in another form . . . i thought about that . . . suddenly it hit me . . . the fantasy was an allegory for part of me . . . a year ago i had ended one part of my life . . . in a way i evaporated and come to life again in a new form . . . still alive . . . more alive . . . i once again felt exhilarated . . .

two women who had experienced a variety of drugs in the past reported the fear of being liquid during the fantasy . . . Gayle, a young mother of three, told of a film she had created in her mind . . . colorful streams of light and a cast of hundreds danced in her mind's eye . . . her tale was exciting . . . watching her vivid eyes shine as she told us about it i sensed the incredible creative energy and potential in this circle . . . i listened and saw how each story revealed a new facet of each individual in the room . . . fact and fancy . . . reality and dreams . . . i was happy to be part of this experience . . .

Lyn had placed three full-length mirrors around the room . . . she now asked if we'd like to try to do some work with them . . . after a medley of assorted groans we all gathered around the mirror near the record player . . . i noted in retrospect that those who groaned the loudest worked the hardest at the mirror later that day . . . silence . . . Sharon volunteered . . . she slowly stood up and faced herself in the mirror . . .

- what do you see - talk to your reflection -
Lyn urged . . . -
- i see two shoulders - one is lower than
the other - my neck looks stiff -
- talk to your neck - Lyn said
- neck you look so stiff like you are
carrying a heavy burden

- what's it carrying asked Lyn
- my head - laughed Sharon
- talk to your head this time Lyn suggested
- head, you are so bloody heavy, so weighed
down with worries and troubles and fears

Attitudes are related to biological processes; for every change in the body there is a change in the mind. A young person, whose nervous system quickly restores the body to health after stress situations, can afford to take risks, to live energetically, with accompanying attitudes of mind: quick-wittedness, 'putting his foot on it', a desire for novelty, adventure and so on; and sometimes there is a surplus of energy that is discharged in violence or aggression. An old person, on the other hand, needs to conserve his energy, because nerves, muscles and body tissues are not easily repaired; and so he tends to be cautious, slow-moving, thoughtful and retiring; his activity tends to centre on his mind rather than his body.

As I myself grow old I have the feeling of returning home - a sense of peace - the busy world is hushed - a sense of fulfilment, of repose. This is not the result of effort; it just happens. There is a slowing down in thought and action, a slowing down that is accompanied by various insights about life. You are able to see the whole of life, not just a part of it. You don't live in the part any more.

This slowing down leads to what Maslow describes as a trust in the self and a trust in the world, the giving up of straining and striving and permitting oneself to be determined by the intrinsic matter-in-hand, the here-now.

The way I look back to childhood, for instance, changes as I change. In adolescence, I saw my childhood as something I had to put behind me; I rejected my parents and their ideas and tried to make a life of my own, which is normal and healthy for a boy in his teens. Now, as befits my age, as I go back in memory, I am quite happy to return home. I go back to the scenes of childhood not as a prodigal son, but with my eyes open and without rose-coloured spectacles. I return home to share the problems of my parents, because I can now see their problems as my own, just as I can see my achievements as theirs. I am no longer ashamed of them. I have grown up at last.

In the memory you go back to the same place. Everything seems the same; but you have changed, and so you see something quite different.

This can happen, in fact, where you are now. You change, and then your surroundings change. You slow down and the world slows down. People you know, your family and friends, change; they respond to the change they see in you.

There is a poem by Thom Gunn called *The Nature of an Action*. The first verse describes a room with 'heavy-footed chairs, a glass bell loaded with grapes and pears, a polished table . . .' Gunn describes it as 'a cluttered square of fact'. He leaves the room, steps into the corridor, 'directed by the compass of my heart . . .'

But . . .

it was getting very late . . . the snow was still falling . . . we have begun . . . tonight pictures have been snapped . . . tomorrow some photos will be developed . . .

i arrived home safe and sound after another harrowing drive on the icy roads . . . i shared my experiences with Jeff . . . i was starving and ate a delicious vanilla yogurt talking all the time . . . after a super hot bubble bath i fell into bed exhausted . . . fifteen faces swarmed in my mind . . . what would happen tomorrow . . .

the next morning we started by doing an exercise with our own bodies . . . lying in my own private space on the now familiar blue carpet i listened to the gentle music and the lilt of Lyn's quiet firm voice . . .

- study your hands - let one be the leader and the other the follower -

i played with my hands . . . follow the leader . . . i was enjoying myself dancing with my own hands . . . Lyn's voice broke in . . . feel the hands on each side of you she suggested . . . be aware of the temperature, the texture . . . i reached out to both sides . . . the hand to my right felt big, long fingered and bony . . . the hand to my left was cooler, thinner and didn't seem to make close contact . . .

I go back to the beginning (childhood) and see the beginning as it was. Not as the end, as Jean-Paul Sartre and the Gestaltists see reminiscence (beginning at the end; seeing what you are now in the child), you remember, but as it was, with all its problems, emotional, cultural, psychological, economic. There are not unfinished business, because as a child they weren't my business. I didn't see the problems, some of which I can see clearly. I don't know about them, couldn't know about them, through my memory, but through studying the past objectively, in books and diaries, letters and so on.

The actions of others are concerned with their attempts at solving problems; but, of course, a child doesn't know this.

I also go back, to discover what were the internalized attitudes of parents and others that contributed to my life style, my script. And maybe I don't have to go back to do this; I can begin at the end, in the here and now. However you look at it, the past changes, objectively and subjectively. Perhaps objectively you need to know what is happening in some remote part of the Milky Way, millions of light years away, before you can understand what is happening here.

Looking back and seeing my parents as they were has nothing to do with forgiveness, justification or criticism. It is just seeing the past as it was, not making judgement; and it is understanding what remains in the memory (the debit balance) and seeing why it remains there. I want to be able to say to the memory, 'Go away! Don't befuddle me!'

Is it a screen memory? Is what I remember a kind of personal mythology that screens the truth? I can find answers by studying what the specialists and the psychologists, have to say and then by testing their theories through observing my own behaviour

now. But that's not necessary. I know most of the answers myself. I merely have to see 'what is'. The answers are in 'what is'.

When I forgive someone for bad behaviour is it because I need to forgive myself for my own bad behaviour, always assuming, that 'bad' means anything at all? When I make excuses for someone else am I really making excuses for myself? Conversely, when I am unforgiving, am I seeing something in myself that I cannot forgive, the projectively despised part of myself that I have repressed or refuse to see? I don't ask these questions any more, because, I know that the answer, in almost every case, is yes.

Other people's problems are my own. By helping to change others I am helping myself; by changing myself I change others. You are you because (not *and*) I am I, and vice versa. The whole and the parts, society and the individual, are mutually supportive - or, as John Bennett put it, they are held together by 'reciprocal maintenance'. It is not possible to become a person except in a community of persons, just as it is not possible for a heart to be a heart without all the other organs and veins and arteries and cells and so on that make up the human body; but a heart is not a lung.

Hans Lobstein

Group work and community involvement

Community Development is part of a scheme of tapping local community resources and to that extent is a more intriguing aspect of voluntary work. It can be part of a programme to shift the emphasis from the pressures of emergency and crisis work to preventive social work. Group work training helps in this programme.

The group work has two concomitant aims. Firstly to get to know ourselves better. Our own motives and predilections, and secondly to become more community and group oriented. An active and involved community is a happy community to that extent.

On April 4th the first such study day took place in Ealing for trainee social workers. It took time to break down the initial scepticism of those taking part (*'What is all this about? We know all we want to know about group work, etc'*). but by midday the first tentative sparks were struck. (*'We want to do something different. We want to take more risks to learn about each other. We want to learn our aggressive feelings and what to do about them. We want to have more choice . . .'*). By the end of the day we had experienced a great deal of honesty and a new acceptance of each other. A small beginning which hopefully may lead to more.

How can group work training help social workers appreciate the hidden untapped resources of the community? One very simple exercise might be role exchange or role reversal. 'If I know what it feels like to be you I have a much better understanding of