

YERBA BUENA

Consultations for private growth and education. Roger Sanders Smith, 317 Stoney Stanton Road, Coventry CV6 5DS.

CENTRE FOR GROUP WORK AND SENSITIVITY TRAINING

Hans Lobstein, 7 Chesham Terrace, Ealing, W13. Weekends from £6; send s.a.e. for programme.

COMMUNITY

15 Highbury Grange, London N.5. Tel: 01-359 1372 (or 586 3545) Co-Directors and Leaders: Michael Barnett, Carole Davey, Tom Falkner.

Letters to the editor

An Open Letter to the leader after a disappointing weekend encounter group.

Dear Bill,

I am writing to you as a friend, as a sort of follow-up to my weekend experiences in the group. You may feel that many of the criticisms are directed at you and Helen as leaders, but much of what I have to say is directed against the encounter movement as a whole. Note, not the human potential movement, just this type of encounter group; I still believe that some encounter groups are useful in education and especially in counselling. I still believe that personal growth is a good thing.

To me there are two types of group with appropriate exercises and techniques for each. There are interpersonal groups and therapy groups. What I object to more and more is the public therapy group, where there is almost a demonstration of soul-baring to a group of on-lookers, for example the two episodes at lunchtime on Saturday. You will say that I object to therapy (Gestalt and otherwise) because the screaming arouses in me anxieties which I do not wish to face. This may be true, but the point is that I am unlikely to face them in public in this way, simply because someone else chooses to do their personal growth via a public display of anger and grief. In other words, for every person who is stimulated to growth by bioenergetics, just as many - and especially newcomers to encounter - are turned off. These are fairly advanced techniques for an introductory group.

What the weekend did for me was to convince me finally that I am the sort of person who will never act out in public the way some people can and did do. If all encounter groups are to remain this type of 'mutual analysis without permission' group, then I must look around elsewhere for a method of growth which is more suitable to me. I much prefer the interpersonal exercises such as milling, your 'miracle worker' game,

etc., when everyone can participate. Exposure is still going on, but in a slow and safe way, and I reckon that no one exposes anything until they are free from threat (Rogers). But these exercises are regarded as a sort of warm-up to be got rid of as early as possible.

I myself switched off some time around lunchtime on Saturday, apart from a brief lift of interest when you yourself were doing the rounds and I was brought in briefly. You may say that I was not showing much caring for the two who were working on themselves by switching off. O.K., but my span of attention does not last for four hours, and I have seen this method twice before so there was no novelty to keep my interest. I was left feeling I had seen it all before.

This brings me to the role of the leader. I agree with you that the leader should not be working on himself when he is supposed to be facilitating the growth of others. I realise that you were almost forced to work on yourself on Saturday. But of the twenty-four hours I spent at the weekend, only one person other than the leaders was attended to. Obviously things may have changed after I left, but I had had enough by then. I was bored, resentful of others who could work, and disappointed with myself that I could not demand the group's attention and say come and have a look at me. I might have after lunch, but you changed the programme then; I have already done blind walks and had experiences with clay! So in the evening I went home. This was quite something for me, and at least I felt free enough to detach myself from the situation - to be open and honest, and clear off.

This brings me to another point - pressure. I feel the leader should be gently easing people towards growth in the group. Rogers says 'facilitating' and I feel this is fundamental in therapy. You cannot make people do things without resentment creeping in. I felt your co-leader especially was putting pressure on one member, and no matter how important it is to be open and honest she should not have expressed her resentment at those young men who were joking. This must have put them down no end. I suppose I am now comparing what I would have done as leader with what you were both doing, which was inevitable having led groups myself, and so maybe I should not have come at all. But where else does the leader get his own growth experience, except in ordinary groups.

Having tried T-groups, encounter, re-evaluation counselling and transcendental meditation, I now realise that T-groups and encounter groups of the therapy type are just not helpful for my personal needs. I feel I need the privacy of the one-to-one situation which co-counselling offers, and shall probably go back in that direction now, despite the internal political battles. Unless of course there is something more suitable in the offering. Perhaps continuing personal growth needs this variety, and the continuing expansion of methods fills this need. I think now I made a mistake coming on this group in the first place, but at least it has given me some direction - away from encounter and towards co-counselling. This is where I have done most work on myself in the past. I am not made for public displays of emotion.

Jack Ronaldson

Bill and Helen are, of course, not their real names.