

Gaie Houston

Autonomy: Do you jump or are you pushed?

Like you, probably, since you are reading this journal, I am interested in moving myself and other people towards their full potential. Not that I know what *that* means. My assumption is that autonomy, maturity, are the most likely highroads to this potential. And when I use these words, I can happily adopt Perls' definition: 'Maturing is the transcendence from environmental to self-support'. (There is nonsense in it; for example, I could only transcend the support of the physical environment by dying). But as a direction, and as a corrective to dependency games, this definition, and the Encounter rule 'I take responsibility for myself', which follows on the definition, look useful to me.

Then I begin to feel unease, when 'I take responsibility for myself' is obversely stated, in 'I do not take responsibility for you'. Within a specialised setting, such as an Encounter Group, I can see this slogan being very helpful in making obvious the manipulative element in a lot of our behaviour. But another verse of the Encounter Gospel often slides in beside this responsibility clause. It is the one about 'respecting where you are at'. Often and often, I am the person in a group who pushes for acceptance of 'where someone is at'. I have a lively awareness of normative influences, and a need to bring them to people's attention. But I do suspect that respecting where someone is at, especially outside the 'Group', can be easier than expressing unease, disapproval, contempt, or hostility. Do not mistake me. I do not want to scrap respect for where you are at. I just want to make sure that muttering about it does not become a licence for my drawing my boundaries nearer myself and further from you. I do not want 'respect' to come to equal exclusion, rejection and indifference.

This issue is a hot one for me at the moment.* So I want to write the rest of this article about two ways of working with groups, which I learned about earlier this year in West Berlin. My interest is particularly in the issue of 'pushing' versus 'jumping', as I have said in the title. But both the groups I shall talk of seemed full of learning for me, in other ways too. So I hope that what I tell will kindle your imagination, though perhaps in quite different ways from how they fired mine.

In a poor quarter of Berlin, in a disused warehouse, live fourteen or fifteen people who call themselves junkies, though they do not now take drugs of any kind - not even tobacco! Some of them have children, who live with them and go to the neighbourhood schools. The building is shabby, but clean, kempt and friendly. The Berlin Senate now pays the rent and something towards the heating. Otherwise, the commune keeps itself, by 'spoiling nice paper with black marks' their description of their small printing business, and by using their van for removals and other work.

There are many notable things about the project. One is that it works. Another is that it was started by an addict, and is totally run by the group of addicts. No friendly

psychiatrist or P.S.W. or charitable organisation hovers in the background. They tell of the social worker who showed up in the early days and said he wanted to help. They thanked him, and asked if he would sweep the stairs. He said no, he had more specialised skills to offer them. What were these? Well, he could talk with them. No thanks, they said. We all know how to talk; but those stairs really need sweeping. Since then, they claim, they have not been troubled by 'supporters'.

Their methods are pretty notable too. When an addict arrives on their doorstep, claiming that he wants to come off his addiction, he is given a bed, and advised that the way to stop taking drugs is to stop taking drugs. No medical aid is given; the house door key hangs available in the hallway; and the new arrival is told that in three days they expect him to be working. According to them, there is a point beyond the physical symptoms of withdrawal, which is a return to 'junkies games'. When an addict goes into physical withdrawal distress in hospital or other medically supervised centre, he knows perfectly well that there must be drugs of some kind, somewhere in the place. So he moves in to extreme 'give-it-me' behaviour - violent hallucinations, vomiting, and so on. In this house, there are no drugs, so the personal expense of such behaviour is unnecessary. Either someone wants drugs so much that he leaves, or he accepts cold-turkeying himself in a supportive/abrasive peer group. And this is a central strength of the group. Everyone in it knows drugs by fear, by scars, by their own experience; they are a peer group of experts.

In day-to-day life, the group has its full meeting one a week, at which all personal and inter-personal hassles are aired. It seems that from the paucity of their lives when on drugs, the members have moved into a way of living which is much richer than many other people's. They have in a sense suffered their deaths and been re-born. And they know that without full and searching awareness and communication, they will die again. The junky is inside them waiting, if they withdraw from full living: if they withdraw from being real in the group.

The analogies with more mundane life-styles are sermonisingly clear. But what concerns me, interests me most at the moment, is seeing what a peer group does, that a hierarchical group does not do. These junkies have licensed themselves to act far tougher to each other than would easily be tolerated in Western society, if the rules were imposed by an outside authority, a 'professional'.

Because they know addiction from going to the limits of terror at what they were doing to themselves, they continuously experience their responsibility for themselves. Not only have they achieved a stable autonomous community, but they have moved dramatically from deficiency to abundance motivation. They have now begun a once-a-month neighbourhood group. Their perceptions are moving out into the world again, and they want to give other people a chance to experience the 'living for real' they are achieving in a fully-communicating group.

Did they jump or were they pushed? On the face of it, they jumped. Each one of them, alone, jumped. But the man who started the group and who is their public spokesman is energetic, charismatic, maybe autocratic. I would guess that he is the

'push', from day to day and week to week. He is the one who manages the group boundaries and who, most importantly, keeps the health of the group by refusing to accept evasion or dishonesty.

The other group, or group method, in my mind, is much nearer a conventional management training scheme, in style if not in content. It is run in a rich suburb by a few left-wing young educators, who wanted to interrupt what they saw as the 'sheep-herding' method of producing factory workers in their city. Briefly, German children go to one of three kinds of school, according to 'ability'. If they go to the majority sort of school, they will almost certainly end up as unskilled or semi-skilled workers, and not move from that status throughout their working lives. As is common in this country, they receive no school education about trade unions, about collective action, or about organising themselves and experiencing themselves as a group. But they are of course subjected to all the tantalising material come-ons of living in a rich society crammed with advertisements and with consumer goods.

Classes of children in their penultimate school year are allowed a residential course lasting a week or two. If they come to this centre, they are asked to write an essay about what they are going to do, and what they are going to be. The delusions of grandeur which emerge, especially from the boys, are vast. Swimming pools and foreign holidays and furs and Mercedes drip from every felt-tip.

So a next session is spent in examining, with the staff, the available statistics about the lives of people who have been through their kind of schooling. After this, the rest of the week is spent either in making and presenting a play about their life-situation, (or anything else), or in group-work designed to give them the feel of being a group, and a potentially oppressed group.

More conservative social workers from the Churches oppose this scheme. It ferments unrest, they say. And what is the good of pointing out to youngsters that they will not be rich, even if it is true? Why create disappointment and disillusion? I would imagine that most people reading this would have a number of answers to these criticisms. I feel that I have.

This scheme is more than an enabling situation in which people make their own growth. It is meant as a push, as a great thump in the back which may one day help the people who were pushed to do their own jumping. And, as such, it has not much to do with the humanistic psychology doctrine of 'respecting where people are at'.

So at the end of this article I stand cautiously on the creaking ice of this paradox; maybe there is sometimes a case for being directive about self-direction. For me, it will sum up to the sentence, 'Because I respect you I will shout at you'. Misunderstood, that is a hideous slogan. Understood, it could keep us moving.

**Gaie Houston and Tricia Scott have written a booklet on Self-Directed Small Groups, and run workshops for people who want to gain skills in this area.*