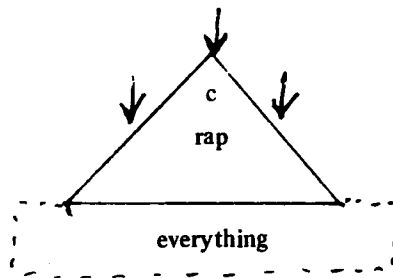


# A model of life and death

Max Praed

American blacks have a saying: Ninety-five per cent of everything is crap. From the usual context I think this refers to the fact that nearly all the political, economic and social institutions in the U.S.A. (and probably everywhere except the People's Republic of China) are organised in hierarchies in which everyone is subject to the corrupting influence of power and consequently 'tends to rise to his level of incompetence' (see *The Peter Principle*, Pan Books, 1970). Let us illustrate this tendency of hierarchies to crap off and rap down on the life-oriented elements in our society:



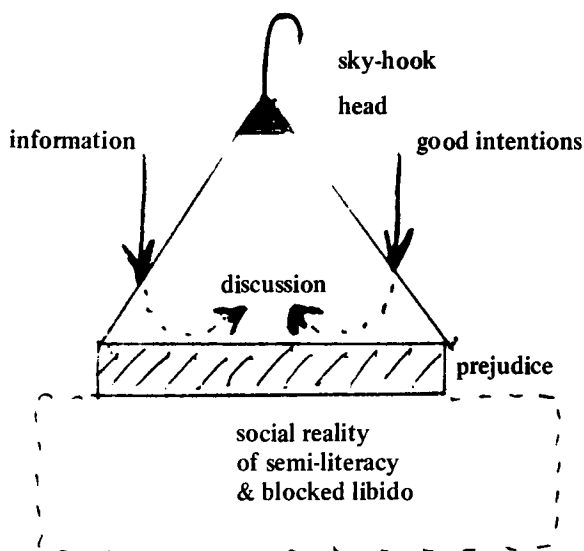
As an academic adult educator since 1958 I have been increasingly impressed by the pervasiveness of this problem and the urgent need for a solution. Existentially I have been part of the institutionalised crap of an educational bureaucracy. I have experienced the Lateral Arabesque and seen examples of Percussive Sublimation and the Free-Floating Apex.\* As for Fileophilia - I recently watched, fascinated, as a bundle of manilla file-covers, each one numbered, headed and spiked *but containing no letters*, were thrown out from the filing cabinet where they had languished since 1966. The colleague who set them up had been called to his reward - the headship of a department in another educational Cheopsian Hierarchy. I claim to have failed to reach my Peter's Plateau by the judicious practice of Creative Incompetence and the prophylaxis of the model of life I am about to describe. But first the model of death - the pyramidal bureaucracy of an academic or government department or institution of traditional adult education:

## \*Glossary (from *The Peter Principle*):

**Lateral arabesque** - a pseudo-promotion consisting of a new title and a new work place.

**Percussive sublimation** - being kicked upstairs; a pseudo-promotion.

**Tileophilia** - a mania for classification of papers.



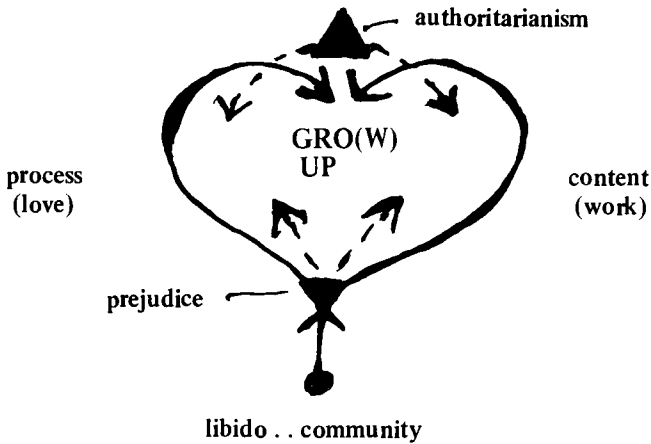
The situation here is that the well-informed and well-intentioned staff and adult students inside the institution, who have not reached their levels of incompetence, are afraid that the head, who has reached his, will come down on them like a ton of bricks if they manage to raise any living issue from the social depths beneath the sea of prejudice. And seeing that the head owes his position on Peter's Plateau of incompetence to the sky-hook that anchors him to the coteries of power Up There, the fear, unlike everything else in the institution, is well based. Because if and when he falls the brittle walls of the pyramid are likely to collapse, bringing down the sky-hook in a shower of ivory-dust.

What usually happens? Pollution and slow death as people go around inhaling powdered facts and the fumes of bodily and systemic decay. What may or can happen? A minority group of the people who work in the institution can decide to *stop* behaving like robots, *look* around them at what is happening on the humanistic frontiers of growth and learning, *listen* to what they are saying to each other and to what their children are saying to them and generally *think* about the options of autonomous, social, existential life or stereotype and creeping death. They will somehow sPR-10-It, become aware of the great life-oriented truth that Freud introduced into modern social thinking and Reich crystallised in the model and summation of his work:



'Love, work and knowledge are the well-springs of our life. This should also govern it.'

This vesicle-type heart-shaped model can be modified to illustrate those self-directed experiential mutual learning groups which embody and transcend the original Freudian and Reichian insights:



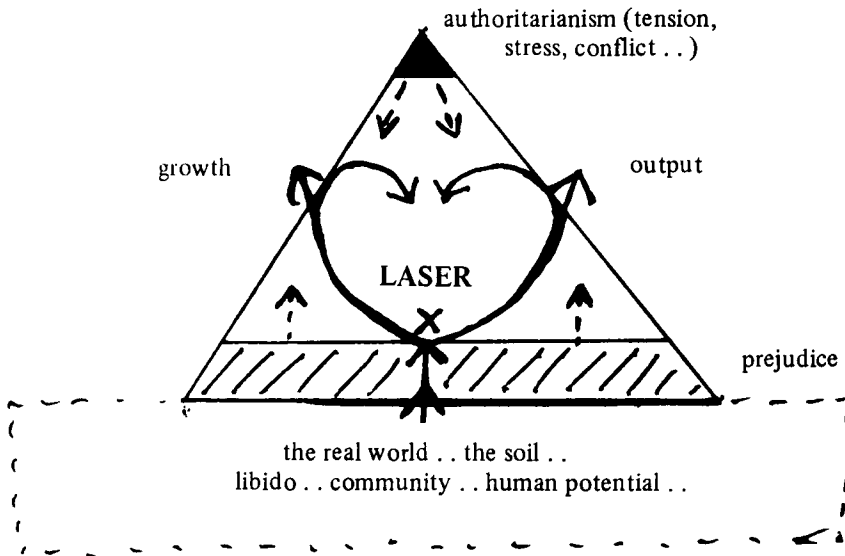
This model emphasises the fact that neither prejudice at the point of entry into the group nor authoritarianism in its overall organisation can withstand the correct combination of process and content that facilitates successful group work by defusing prejudices and diffusing the leadership function. Incidentally it illustrates the operation of personal growth centres which have real, albeit minimal, managerial and social hang-ups.

On the other hand the model of death (fig. 2) is corrupted at the peak by authoritarianism for its own sake (bureaucracy) and at the base by unshakable prejudices. Its alienation from social reality is sustained by the fantasy of a sky-hook attached to an illusory external locus of knowledge and power. The armored boundary of the system is penetrated typically by information greased with good intentions ('lecture-discussions') which circulate endlessly in researching the need for research and rooting about in the grass roots. This is of course an example of emphasis by exaggeration. There must be some good in pyramidal hierarchies. They have built-in safeguards and get things done. Even Lord Acton's famous aphorism, correctly quoted, is that power tends to corrupt and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely. There is nothing universal nor absolute about a tendency.

Some similar but opposing arguments mitigate the all-good, all-knowing and all-wise image of the experiential group. As the Stanford study has shown, deleterious effects can result from flashy uncaring leadership while the re-evaluation counselling split has demonstrated the perils of authoritarian centralism and neglect of dependency problems. I have seen an unfortunate example of over-emphasising process and

neglecting content in tertiary teaching resulting in a demand by the students themselves for a more authoritarian, subject-oriented approach. But I think it is true that the combination of autonomy or self-directedness with mutuality or social reference and experiential immediacy together constitute the criteria of life-orientation in human learning.

What is the significance of all this for the real world in which health and educational institutions are hierarchically organised and probably always will be? What happens when the model of life is introduced into the model of death?



It was at Dingleton Hospital that I first began to formulate this model of the therapeutic community and I believe it illustrates the situation that can be brought about in any pyramidal hierarchy within the helping and learning professions as well as the situation of a community like Dingleton within the 'impinging surround' of the National Health organisation. Old Lefties will recognise the similarity to the thesis of classical marxism that the seed of the new society will burst through the husk of the old. X marks the time of the greatest vulnerability for the nascent group when it swims up through the sea of prejudice and begins meeting under a miasma of indifference and hostility from insecure fellow-workers and an incompetent head. The walls of the pyramid are burst open by burgeoning growth and output only when they remain stubbornly rigid. One of these things will then happen:

Some or all of the living members of the group movement will escape to find a host hierarchy which offers a more favorable environment for life. The pyramid may then revert to invincible inflexibility and eventual decay (not, of course, necessarily); or authoritarianism (self-discipline and goal-orientation) and prejudice (discrimination conservatism) and excrete the elements of corruption.

The word LASER is an anagram of the first letters of autonomous, social, experiential learning research, which goes on either consciously or unconsciously in every community of free learners and helpers.

Learning is a process that changes the learner and his world. At best, it includes pleasure and libido in *ananda*, the ultimate joy of living.

Light has always been the medium for carrying copious information at great speed. Lasers and other devices can now process vastly more information and provide vastly more feedback than was possible prior to their discovery.

LASER is therefore a useful mnemonic for the life-oriented processes that groups are all about.

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# The examination room

David Boll

I

I am in an examination room. Now in this examination room there are a lot of syllabuses and so forth. They are all up there on a board at the side of the room - the papers, the questions. For example, Job - How much money are you earning? What position have you reached? How are you getting on with your colleagues? and so on. And then Marriage - How successful? How often do you fuck your wife? Does she like it? Do you like it? Are you a good father? And Leisure - Friends, your relationship with them? Then, Location of Housing - Where do you live? How much did your house cost? It's pretty boring to read all this that's why I am not going into an awful lot of detail.

Then round the room there are dreadful warnings under each heading. Like, under job they have someone who's down and out, drinks methylated spirits, beard, red face. He does not look happy, it must be said. He looks bloody angry. Mark you, he does not look much angrier than most people strike me as feeling. Still, he looks angry and he is what happens if you don't do too well in your exams. And then Marriage - there is this man sitting alone in a very spruce bedsitter looking at the television. It's a terrible, sterile environment, very low and bloody awful. Friends - there's another lonely man, and his house is in a terrible mediocre suburban terrace in an indeterminate region of a characterless town in the empty middle spaces of England - pretty grim, I should think.

I have looked at those dreadful warnings, and what do I do now? Am I going to do well or badly? I am anxious. I know I have been worrying a lot about these exams.

Well, it's easy to answer the questions. I know how much I am earning, I know all that, so I can answer the questions pretty easily. So that's that. So I answer the questions