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Celebrating differences- The Magic Mixer

One dilemma surrounding individuals in our modern world is needing to be ME while needing to belong. Our earliest memories of encountering our peers are filled with the pain of figuring out how not to seem different or strange. It's called 'socialization'.

Traditional therapy is a powerful part of the socialization process. It is not unusual to find years of hard work devoted to helping one homosexual develop heterosexual behavior in order to reduce guilt and improve interpersonal prospects. Great energy is expended in reducing a housewife's frustration at her menial tasks. Her awareness of her low estate is dimmed and she is helped to feel elevated by glowing restatements of cultural platitudes about the joys of motherhood and glistening dishes.

We humanistic counselors are dedicated to the priority of the person. The ME is more important than the society, if only because we know that a healthy society is a group of healthy MEs. We seek to develop ways for people to be themselves, while improving their skills for building closer relationships.

The methods we use are various and inventive. They are usually from experience, and not the result of theoretical constructs. Developing social skills is promoted by encouraging clients to go out and develop social skills. We set up groups to start it easy. We may encourage encounter or confrontation to make the unknown outside world less threatening. At the same time an increased sense of self results from the experience. These and other methods are used to improve awareness of feelings and behavior patterns. There has been an increase in the use of teaching information about human behavior to clients. The results of all of this has been impressive. Not enough to meet our idealistic goals, but impressive.

As a group, we humanistic counselors are becoming less competitive and more willing to share with each other the infinite variety of ideas which produce results. At *Change Agents*, a humanistic counseling center in U.S.A., we do just that. We share and we use and we invent and combine ideas to produce results. And each of us does it differently.

We have a special slant. Our counseling is client directed. The client is expected to take a much more active role in the work than in any other approach we know. This requires some of our own inventions. They are largely conceptual (like T.A.) and experiential (like gestalt), and much less sophisticated.

For example, we teach our clients to celebrate their differences. Our usual presentation goes something like this. We learn painfully that we are put down for our differences from our earliest childhood. We are criticized for them. We make mistakes by trying adventurous things. So we learn to hide anything that we think might be

different. We learn to conform. In contrast, the greatest thing I have to offer you in our relationship is my differences. My opinions, points of view, different information and different experiences. It's my differences that make my ME special. I have been influenced by different people. I have seen the same people in different ways than you. I am the only one in all history that has put these experiences together as I have. It offers a fresh look at the world. A new, different slant from yours.

My ME is different from all the MEs in the world. I have all kinds of things to offer you. Different feelings. Different experiences. Everything we experience together, even the same things, are different, because we experience them differently.

And your ME is different from mine. You have a special ME. You have experiences I can never have. I can learn from them. I can see differently from them. I can discover from them. Your ME is one more of the endless experiences I have, and it will take me a lifetime to live yours with you.

Differences are the Magic Mixers. They let my ME mix with your ME and neither of us loses anything. We can love. We can relate closely. As long as our differences flourish we have lost nothing of our MEs - my ME or your ME. And we still have a closeness, a relationship. We can even have a permanent relationship (most humanists blanch over this oldie), one which we can keep until death, and still not lose our MEs.

Now, with this, when I walk into a group, I bring my ME. I don't hide it any longer. More than that, I have a chance to meet a whole lot of different MEs. I can listen to each of them and increase my experiences by hearing and appreciating their differences.

That is a fairly typical presentation - such as might be given in a group, and then repeated in bits from time to time. In individual sessions we use it with much more variation, depending on the needs. Sometimes to strengthen something 'different', like a sexual variance. Sometimes to reduce conflict with a partner by appreciating the other's difference. Sometimes to strengthen a resolve to stand firm, without explaining 'why' (the old trap designed to break a child's ME).

The presentation given above, just in itself, strengthens the person AND the relationship. As it is experienced and explored in life both and further strengthened. Our experience is that it often happens suddenly and permanently. I believe that it has something to do with the fact that the presentation is conceptual and not intellectual; that is, it is experiential and concrete. It is also emotive. It is easily and quickly received by the widest variety of persons. The ME is not defined by us. Ego. soul - each will make of it what is necessary for that person, different from all others (here we go again). The development of a sense of the ME comes through growth, each special. The whole process is a validation of differences.

The resulting positive reinforcement is more than one might expect. Put downs from others become less hurtful as they are validly understood as another's inability to deal with differences. And they are often tolerated less 'enduringly' by one who has been through this small learning.

There are endless ramifications of this celebration of differences. Each of us can go on our own trip about it. My trip is that I see people as knots in a fishing net, each of us attached to many others in a mutual relationship. I am a little of this person and a little of that. And the persons that I am a little of, I have put together in a special way. Notice how through me you have access to others in the net, and how that access is different from what it would be through anyone else.

Me, I'm a bit of Thomas Aquinas, Charlie Chaplin, Bill W., and a few others you wouldn't know. I am firmly held in the net of humanity by how each of these has touched me. And I am free in how I put them together.

It is also a part of my personal prejudice that in this celebration of differences the ideal and the real touch. Maybe only briefly. But they touch. That's my prejudice. My experience is that Celebrating Differences IS the Magic Mixer. It works.