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# Turning Point

I am sometimes asked "Does attending groups make any real difference to your life?" "O.K. You have a very interesting time, gather insights, go through perhaps profound emotional experiences - but doesn't life go on as usual - the insights muddled over, the feeling of closeness and real communication with others lost?"

I want to record an incident in a group I attended which did prove to be a clear turning point. This incident also demonstrates the power of 'listening' - in giving another person full attention without comment - Buber's 'Unconditional Personal Regard'.

It was a five-day workshop in Guildford led by John Heron attended by about ten people whose work involved them in the 'Counselling' role. The length of the group, the professional nature of its composition, and John's superb leadership, had enabled us all to use both dyadic relationships, the relationship of one to the group, and individual cathartic work facilitated by John. There was no feeling of pressure, or that the individual would have to assert herself strongly to receive group attention or support. That was freely available.

We dealt with theory and techniques as well as with our own individual hang-ups that made it hard - or impossible - to give another full attention. John had focussed attention on the concept of 'autonomy' and this led the group to considering the relationships both in theory and in our own experience between the autonomous individual and the other or a group. And for most of us, the crucial relationship was the 'mate' relationship or lack of it, where the theoretical question of dependence v. independence emerged in a highly charged practical form. The unarticulated question was floating around "To what extent am I, can I be, autonomous in my most important one-to-one relationship?"

It was a grey-sky low-energy February afternoon. To my surprise I exerted myself and suggested to John that we all go round in turn and make a statement to the group about our 'mate' relationship - not an explanation, nor in an expectation of comment from the others, but just telling how it was. This was agreed, and as I had proposed the exercise, I began.

I told how I lived with my husband and children. How sex relations had been difficult and were now non-existent. How much I valued my attic room where I could have peace, become separate from the 'family', feel temporarily no longer trapped by domestic 'roles'. I expressed my feelings of resentment. I put forward my usual justifications for a situation of compromise in which everyone felt trapped and unhappy but which seemed the best solution.

When I had said all I wanted to say I stopped talking and everyone remained silent. Although in some ways it had been like talking to myself because I had not modified anything to fit my perceptions of a listener, yet for ten

or fifteen minutes I had received the full and clear attention of maybe ten people. I felt I had been heard. I felt received. I was moved and near to tears, as were others.

Then others told their story. Not everyone felt able to tell about themselves and their most personal relationship. It felt a most moving and beautiful privilege to listen to another without any obligation to 'help', to analyse, to comment. One's mind peripherally noted the confusions, the inconsistencies, the contradictory arguments with which a chosen line of behaviour was supported, but this was not the main level at which the listening took place. I felt as if I was *feeling* another person in their efforts towards growth, towards exercising fully-responsible choice (which, for me, is autonomy.) Something like being present at a birth.

Afterwards there was silence. Everyone seemed plunged in a deep inner musing. John felt we should now do something else - but the group wanted to stay for a while in this state of unthinking reverie - to me it felt like a state of being in touch with the truth in me and for once accepting it without comment or ifs-and-buts.

Within three weeks, a decision exploded into my consciousness, as though some inner process of integration had been completed. It was entirely ridiculous to continue my married situation! To continue blaming 'the situation', blaming 'the children', blaming 'my husband'. I did not want to 'do' that situation any more, and I wanted to leave. The decision simply made itself. No agonising, no internal argument and discussion. There it was.

Now, a year after that group, I am living by myself in a flat I've done up by myself and setting my face towards choosing my own life instead of dodging the issue and compromising. Oh yes, with excellent outward justification but motivated basically out of failure to live *me* a cowardice. Those 'excellent justifications' are demonstrated as empty. My children are all right, after all. I'm all right, after all. My husband, who hated my leaving, now discovers he is liberated from a sort of prison - though with the mixed feelings that liberation brings!

Thank you, Group. By listening to me, by validating me, you gave me the courage and energy to make a new choice.

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