

Wendy Freebourne

HOLISTIC GROWTH

I want to start by sharing my experience of the creation of the 1984 Theme Workshops as an example of Holistic Growth. The idea was to have a series of mini conferences to explore major life themes and transitions in the context of living in the world as it is. And for those people concerned with these issues of living, with the processes of growth and with the changing order of our society, to come together with individuals working in relevant specialist fields, to explore these themes both theoretically and experientially. They would be problem-solving workshops, specifically dealing with the challenges of our time in a potent and human way.

I would like to share some of the ideas which inspired that vision for me, in an attempt to explore the idea of Holistic Growth. My dictionary defines Holism as "The view that an organic whole has a reality greater than and independent of the sum of the parts". I wanted to offer something to those who care about growth, therapy, humanistic psychology; something new; something complete. I wanted to look at growth in a holistic way, as a life process. I believe that there is a pattern to life transitions and these patterns repeat themselves throughout life, at times of transition, and in all the separate, but related, areas of life.

I started from a position of despair, both within, experiencing my own feelings of powerlessness and without, looking at the world situation and what future it might offer for my children. For me it was a time of crisis. And I saw the themes, Birth, Childhood, Adolescence, Sexuality, Relating, Maturity, Ageing and Death as crises in the life development of a person and symbolic of the life development of a society. Crisis not only as negative, but as a turning point. Also crisis as a point of growth - a node from which growth starts.

So the formation of four workshops, four sets of growing points also became one whole. There was an overall theme of Holistic Growth. Thus the fifth workshop, Synthesis. Nobody really knows yet what that is going to be about. It depends on the others. And we do not know yet how they will turn out; how can we? That is what Holistic Growth is all about. Perhaps there is an X factor. What is this "independent reality" of growth? What does it mean?

There was the power and drive I put into the work - the thrust of growth, dignified, self-contained, surging forward, slow, rhythmical but persistent. Can we apply this image to our lives? Because if we can, we may be grounding a vision. To have vision, one must step back, take an overall view. Perhaps this is when Holism becomes important. When we are in the process, on the ground, we experience chaos, disorder. But if we were a big bird, looking down from above on this seething mass of growth, what would we see? A total entity which cannot be experienced by each of its parts. It would see something more than the sum of those parts. It would have a sense of their common denominator, their uniting force, the thread that runs through the story of their lives, all ages, all groups, all races and creeds; the link which binds them into a whole and makes them, holistically, greater than and independent of, the sum of their parts.

But what is the thread, the link which unites all growth? It is life. Where there is life there is growth. What does this mean? I remember my insecurity about the Theme Workshops. We wanted to provide a place for people to come and explore and experience their own process of growth, what that meant to them. My insecurity was about the need to have a minimum of structure. You cannot grow without space to grow into. But lack of structure, for me, meant chaos.

But growth also needs support. We have asked people to come to share. We have invited some people with ability, through their experience and work, to offer support. But we are inviting people to experience being supportive to one another. This is co-operation. We are also asking people to give sustenance to one another, to feed one another with what they have to bring and share. But why a workshop? Along with space, organic growth also needs containment. Why? Because any growing thing needs time to grow as well as space, and during that time, when it is emerging from chaos, it needs to be held, to be kept safe, protected from external forces until it can protect itself, fend for itself; and to be given succour when it cannot provide its own. To let ourselves experience our own chaos is very difficult when we are busy organising these necessities of life for ourselves.

That leads me to the other reason for having the workshops. Organisation. Why organise when we want to experience chaos, to be free of structure? Let us not confuse organisation with control. Control is what happens when we do not have organisation. Organisation is organic. Because what grows, grows out of chaos, not into it. Growth is towards structure, organisation, focus, creating, producing. If it were not, it would be scattered, unproductive, useless and waste-

ful. If growth is not organised, we have the situation where one energy system outgrows, overpowers and thus controls another. We all know what happens to a beautiful garden when the weeds take over. So growth, organised in space and time produces rhythm, harmony and useful co-operation. Why useful? Because there is value in sharing. The whole is greater than its parts. Experience shared is greater than experience in isolation; it is more creative.

I have a view now of the parts. But what is this something extra which makes whole holistic? Perhaps it is the transpersonal, the higher order of things, greater meaning. Surely there is greater meaning in our common roots, common growth, common cause, than in our individual, seemingly selfish, narcissistic strivings? Looked on from above by that great bird, our efforts at growth appear a squirming, teaming, pathetic mass. But as the great bird watches, it sees that they sometimes merge, come together, and separate again. They have meetings and partings. They touch, move together. And gradually, imperceptibly something is changing; it is a part of evolution. Life not only goes on, it also evolves. Perhaps Holistic Growth is about evolution.

I have not answered the question, what is Holistic Growth? I have merely thrown out some ideas - some of my own chaos. Perhaps I am experimenting to see if anything will grow out of that. The Theme Workshops have not happened yet. It is our hope that they will grow organically. I hope we have provided the right ingredients for that growth. As I write this, those five weekends, those five spaces we have provided are already being peopled by those who will inhabit those spaces, experiment with the ingredients and, hopefully, grow out of the experience. But that is for another issue.

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