

# Nicholas Albery

## DICE THERAPY

"Would you like your life to become more spontaneous, more creative, more sexual, more prosperous or even just half an inch funnier? Are there risks that you would love to have permission and encouragement to try? Are there things that you would like to do 1/80th or 1/100th of your life, or such a small fraction that you never get around to doing them? Have you got hidden subpersonalities waiting to express themselves?"

Thus went the blurb for the 'Dice Therapy' group weekend I led with the playwright and theatre director Ken Campbell, (the man who put on the 24-hour play 'The Warp' at the ICA theatre and 'Illuminatus' at the National Theatre).

We had two books as inspiration - firstly, the very funny novel, 'The Dice Man', by Luke Rhinehart (published by Granada, '72); in this the psychoanalyst hero begins his life of risk-taking by saying to himself, "If that dice has a '1' face up, I'm going downstairs to rape Arlene". The dice shows a '1', he goes downstairs, finds Arlene is not unreceptive to his rape, and his totally transformed dice life begins.

Our second model was a brilliant book aimed at drama teachers, 'Impro', by Keith Johnstone (published by Methuen, '81), in which Keith writes: "As I grew up, everything started getting grey and dull, I could still remember the amazing intensity of the world I'd lived in as a child, but I thought the dulling of perception was an inevitable consequence of age - just as the lens of an eye is bound gradually to dim. I didn't understand that clarity is in the mind. I've since found tricks that can make the world blaze up again in about fifteen seconds, and the effects last for hours".

So at 7 pm on a warm Friday evening, July 22nd 1983, we gathered as a group of twelve - three women and nine men, including Ken and me (- we as leaders were committed to 'taking risks' along with the rest of the group). We are all shy and silent in the large group room on the edge of Hampstead Heath. Apart from a divorced civil servant, Mary, a feminist and pacifist social worker, Jane a teacher and

writer, Harry, an out-of-work salesman, Arthur, a musician, Jeff, a co-counsellor, Ian, an out-of-work actor, and Matthew, a solicitor turned acrobat. The oldest member of the group is Helen, aged about 55, who tells us how she is living at home with her 90 year old mother.

We spend the first evening of the group fairly conventionally, in pairs giving each other details of our lives and then acting as the other person to the whole group. Ken instructs us on how to make our performances funnier - "It helps to round your mouth like a hole, and to imagine a hole in your third eye, and to keep your heads down". He gets us to raise or lower the status of the evening so far, and he gives us a spontaneity training exercise of dashing around the room naming things by what they are like and then by what they are not like.

It is only as we break for the night that we play our first dice game. I get people to write down six risks - six things that are not of the ordinary for them to do, and they are committed to doing whichever of these options comes up when they throw the dice - with tasks to be completed by 10 am the next morning, when the group meets again.

People play the first round relatively timorously - Harry's risks include "to smoke pot or grass for the first time", Mary's "to go swimming in Hampstead Pond at 7.30 am", and Jeff's "to have a sexual fantasy about someone on the tube tonight to use when wanking at home".

It is only a day later that I learn that wanking becomes the subject of an 'illicit' dice game between the three group members - Harry, Allen and Mary - whom I've allowed to doss down on the floor of the group room overnight. They end up, at Allen's instigation, throwing dice for whoever gets a 5, who will then masturbate in front of the other two. No one throws a 5. They are so excited in anticipation and are now so disappointed, that they decide to throw again. This time Mary gets the 5, and, feminist principles notwithstanding, she presents the two men with the spectacle of her masturbating herself to orgasm.

The next morning I turned up to lead the group in a 'Rebirthing' breathing session. First I get them in pairs to say what they know of their birth circumstances and early childhood, and then I tell them a bit about Rebirthing: it is a matter of lying down, and breathing intensely into the upper chest for an hour or so, under supervision, breaking through ideally to an "energy release" - access to new energy and old feelings and memories, including sometimes memories of birth. Most of the group soon have the familiar Rebirthing symptoms of

tingling throughout the body, and, for those who are tense, some temporary feelings of paralysis in the arms and legs. Both Mary and Matthew report birth fantasies - Matthew tells the unlikely tale of being born "plop" into the doctor's kidney-shaped dish for medical instruments, which makes him and the rest of us laugh. Mary reports her more dramatic session in which there was much weeping, pain and near-epilepsy: "I felt born in a rush, with later a feeling of being huge without boundaries". She tells of going from feelings of anxiety and panic to "a great infantile sense of loss - somebody's taken something away from me and I'm helpless" - followed by feelings of "fear, anger, comfort, safety and ecstasy". "I start to float, I feel sexual pleasure without an object, I give myself over to some moments of ecstasy. I feel like a baby . . . what other creature could experience the world in such a subjective way?".

After this integration period in which everyone shared their experiences, we agreed to a very long lunch break, to give everyone a chance to recover. We also agreed to play the dice game over lunch. I threw the dice and got option 3 - to go up to the first policeman I meet and say "Good afternoon, Constable, we are all one".

There is a policeman over the road in Hampstead High Street. Knowing that hesitation is fatal to my courage, I go straight up to him: "Good afternoon, Constable, we are all one". He looks determined not to be phased, to remain the good community copper, although evidently slightly anxious and suspicious. "What have you been doing this morning?" "Breathing". "What were you thinking about?" "Birth". "Do you ride a bicycle?" (presumably this non-sequitur was to probe whether I might be a danger on the roads) "Yes, do you?" "I used to ride a tricycle", he tells me, "But I'm too big now. It's good for the breathing though". "Keep on breathing", I reply, and we part amiably, and I laugh a lot afterwards at the memory of our absurd conversation.

The main afternoon risk-taking game is led by Ken. Its aim is to get us all to take risks out in the real world, and to open us up to the possibilities inherent in even the most mundane casual social encounter. First he gets us to insult each other in pairs and to parade around the Heath carrying posters - mine says "I am No.6 in a series of 10". Then we have to choose a local shop by lot. I get the 'Ingrid Baron Art Gallery' in South End Road. From the other pile of folded-up papers, we pick a pre-ordained act to carry out in the shop. I get the command "Rub noses with the assistant". Others get even harder assignments, such as "Go into the shop and order something. Then pretend you've been stung by a bee and run out of the shop with your trousers down". Poor shopkeepers!

I go into my gallery, and start looking nervously at the pictures. To my dismay, the man in charge comes up from below, where he has been busy working, and he does not look in a good mood. "What do you want?" "Oh I'm just looking around". He hovers impatiently, waiting for me to go. Eventually I realise that I cannot keep him waiting any longer. "I don't want to waste your time. I just want to rub your nose". I approach him menacingly, trapping him in the stairwell. He looks horrified and backs his head away against the wall. I manage to rub his nose with mine. "You don't mind do you? You've got a nice nose. And it fulfils a pledge for me". I hurry out of the gallery and share my elation with Jeff who says, yes, he did run out of a shop screaming from a bee sting, but, no, he did not in the end dare to take his trousers down.

After dinner it's 'boss/slave' experiment time. We throw dice for partners. Whoopee! I'm with Mary. We throw again. She is to be my boss for the first forty minutes, I am to be her slave. She takes me off swimming in Hampstead Pond. Soon it's my turn to be boss. I choose a sunny spot on the Heath and get Mary to 'frot' me all over to warm me up, whilst telling me her life story.

Back at the group room, we learn of other people's adventures. Arthur had forced Ken to recite Shakespeare in a hospital waiting area, with pistachio ice-cream on his nose and the cone dramatically poised in his hand, and to impersonate Elvis with a cucumber microphone in the Hampstead Underground lift. In return, Arthur had had to accompany Ken to the pub, and to drink a glass of water containing cucumber and crisps, whilst holding conversations with strangers about pictures of pigs (from a vegetarian standpoint); he had also had to do a ballet dance for a terrace full of drinkers, climb pavements, war-dance around a letter-box and other delights.

The next group exercise involved everyone taking off as many clothes as they could bear to, and, in pairs, telling each other what we thought of our bodies, and what our sexual fears and fantasies were. Allen's fantasy was of cunnilingus with Mary and Jane whilst being whipped by Jane .

For the last event of the day, I proposed we do a group streak "just across the road and back". Everyone eventually agrees, some more reluctantly than others, so, to make it easier, I turn the lights down while people strip. I had hoped this Hampstead side road would be quiet by 9.45 pm, but in fact there are cars with headlights shining at us. We are no sooner down the house steps onto the pavement when, Oh my God, it's the landlord who rented us the room and told

us not to annoy the neighbours, coming down the road towards us. He's angry: "That's not very adult behaviour is it. Get back inside. And Nicholas, come up and see me".

We all troup back into our room and collapse, laughing hysterically. I'm clutching myself and repeating over and over "Oh my God". We throw the dice as to what to do next. Option 3 comes up, that Ken and I should forthwith go up and talk to the landlord. The landlord is possibly in awe of Ken, the famous playwright, and is surprisingly conciliatory: "If I'd realised it was a streak just to the other side of the road, I might have said go ahead".

Next morning I get the group to write down their twenty main pleasures in life, and then ten ways to earn money from their pleasures, a Rebirthing exercise to encourage people to try to combine work and pleasure as much as possible. None of the ideas that come up are that sensible - Ken lists the boss/slave game as a pleasure, and proposes setting up a slave agency, with slaves available at £5 an hour, Mary lists enjoying therapy and dancing - perhaps she could run a therapeutic disco. Allen, whose pleasures include the occasions (rare surely) when he's attractive to women, says he would like to be paid to become more attractive. He is not pleased when I rather tactlessly suggest that he join the Uglier Model Agency, and pose as a model for 'before' and 'after' beauty treatments.

People then have to write letters to themselves, as to their main aims for the next year, followed by commitments they are prepared to make to achieve these aims. They address envelopes to themselves and I posted the letters a month later, to remind them of their commitments and to help ensure that the group would lead to long-term changes in their lives.

In the afternoon, since it is a Sunday, I decide to lay on an exercise with a religious flavour. Everyone strips naked, except for two dissenters, Jane and Ian (I'd given everyone a form to sign at the beginning of the group which emphasised that their participation in any exercise was voluntary). Then one by one, they come naked into the middle to be 'baptised' with the 'gift of tongues'. Next, they have to dance and express their feelings whilst singing in nonsense language for two minutes - so as to allow them to get into their feelings by not having to verbalise them - followed by two minutes of dancing and spontaneous singing in English.

Ken, who's quite bulky, does a hilarious and powerful performance as a sort of tribal Star Wars teddy bear figure, making grumpy anti-

authoritarian noises in my direction, in revenge for me putting him through such a crazy exercise.

Ian, the out-of-work actor, must have felt shamed by his fear of performing naked in front of the group. He had tried to make a joke of it: "I'm worried about my penis size - it's only half an inch long - and two feet wide", and he had done a quite good and very frenzied gibberish act out in the middle in his underpants. But after this exercise he quietly went off in his car, without telling anyone, and did not return. He was our only casualty, our only drop-out from the group (apart from Harry who left on Saturday morning when he heard on the phone that his daughter had had a serious accident).

This naked song and dance was perhaps the hardest exercise of the weekend. As Arthur commented after the group: "This was one of the toughest games . . . I had quite a build-up of fear before doing it, but felt relieved and liberated afterwards. In fact I was sure I could do **anything** now".

We then went as a group to go swimming in Hampstead Pond. I wanted to get everyone a bit cold so as to encourage trembling in the legs during the bioenergetic exercises that followed - the Reichian theory being that involuntary body movements of this nature are a good preparation for deeper orgasms, bringing on the so-called 'orgasm reflex' pelvic movements.

Up on the Heath, we massaged each other in pairs, and we played games intended to develop our 'Yea-saying' attitude towards life (as opposed to 'Naysaying' people, for whom "impulses are seen as forces requiring control"). As Freudians Crouch and Kenison put it, "Naysayers' are in a state of high psychological inertia - impulses undergo a series of delays, censorships and transformations before they are permitted expression" \*)

On the Heath, Ken directed a game in which every question had to be answered without prior thought and enthusiastically, starting with the word "Yes and" (to agree to suggestions made, instead of the more normal depressive "Yes but's" of daily living). We lay in a star formation with our heads together, telling a chaotic story for which each person contributed one word at a time. We stayed in this position (to the surprise of passers-by on the Heath), as we chanted the Tibetan 'Aum' chant, 'Aum' as the sound of the universe. For Arthur and Mary

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\*) From 'Yeasayers', Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, Vol. 160, No.2, 1960, quoted in 'Impro', page 107.

this was the climax of the group, the magical moment when they knew they were headed for romance. As Arthur put it: "Now, I've done a few 'Aums' in my time, but this was a humdinger. I think that Mary and I merged auras or something . . . It became obvious that we were on a fortunate collision course".

I was hoping the group as a whole would head ever higher towards its own climactic ending at 7 pm that evening. We 'brainstormed' as a group ideas for a final event. Allen's suggestion received the most votes: the women to tell the men what to do for a quarter of an hour, and then for it to be the men's turn. We have to go outside the room whilst the women consider their options. Allen meanwhile is in high spirits, and climbs a tree outside the house, as if he has regressed millions of years during the weekend from civil servant to his old monkey self, and he starts shouting to the neighbours "I'm in Nicholas' group. He's responsible" - in further defiance of the landlord's injunction not to annoy the neighbours. I cannot help laughing at his irrepressible spirits.

The women's first command is to Allen - to get him out of the way, they send him on a fifteen minute run across the Heath. Then Diana and Mary choose the two men they most fancy as masseurs - Jeff and Arthur - whilst Helen remains a spectator, and the rest of us are set to work tidying up the room and doing the washing up.

Soon it is the turn of the men, and Allen is back, ready for his revenge. He finds a place for himself on the cushions between Jeff and Arthur, with all three due to receive a massage from Jane and Mary. Allen wants the women to be "topless". Jane refuses to comply. Mary is willing. I chip in: "The rest of us are excluded, I'd like at least some visual stimulation" and I offer to undress Mary completely. I do it as gently as I can and Mary is kind enough to say "I don't like men undressing me - normally". Then I massage her back whilst she massages Allen. Allen wants to be spanked, and Jane, who cannot stand him, briefly obliges, bringing up red welts on his bare bum. Mary also obliges several times. Allen has an erection but still complains, "You aren't doing it properly. You don't know how to spank a man". The rest of the group, Ken with a cigar in his mouth, sit around goggle-eyed at this grotesque finale with the masochist 'coming out' in public.

It is time for a final circle for 'acknowledgments', sitting in a circle holding hands. I start it off: "I acknowledge you Allen for your outrageousness", and then it's his turn to 'acknowledge' whoever he wants, the idea being to end on a positive note, and to clear away any feelings

of guilt or shame. The circle continues until everyone has been 'acknowledged' at least once. And so the group officially ends.

I felt high afterwards. Straight after the group, the rustling grass on the Heath beckoned to us again, and I go swimming naked with Jane in Hampstead Pond, and discover the 'Zen Art of Swimming' - swimming without disturbing the water, quietly and efficiently. To my heightened state, there is suddenly a Zen art of everything. The Zen art of getting tired swimming, the Zen art of appearing to drown, the Zen art of talking to Diana without being listened to. Every activity is a potential path to enlightenment.

Jane and I have been friends for years, but the group brought us together and we have been together ever since. The two of us spent the last night in the group room, and, still under the influence of the group, we experimented with different ways of being - discovering that we got on best using Irish accents for philosophising, Indian for comedy and French for romance.

Something of the group's high spirits has remained with me since, although gradually I have had to learn the Zen art of coming down from a 'peak experience'. In the month or two after the group, Ken and I received the promised 'letters of evaluation' from several members of the group. Helen wrote: "Parts of the weekend were very funny and it was not at all boring. There were a lot of good ideas. Some I wrote down after I got home, thinking I might try them out with a small group of young children . . . I realised how little risk-taking I do. It's quite morale-raising". Mary wrote: "I came away from the Dice weekend with a good strong sense of not only being able to make decisions, but being able to make the right decisions . . . Merely surviving it all was a real boost to my confidence". Jeff was more negative, and felt the weekend "dipped toes into bits and pieces . . . Lots of potential bits were not developed or worked on", but he continued, "An ability to make a fool of myself is probably quite useful - is that the point of some of the exercises? (Yes!) That's one positive thing I brought away - that I can 'make a fool of myself' and still be OK . . . Also the dice did help in a way . . . I can **imagine** the dice has decided once I have made a decision, so I can make the most of it without regret".

Arthur was grateful to the weekend for bringing him together with Mary. "And besides", he concluded, "I feel I benefited a lot from the weekend - I feel more confident in my ability to entertain . . . ; I feel more daring; I gave my sexuality a spring-clean; I learnt a little more about how to behave towards women; I laughed a lot more than



I have done for a while - . . . Recommended!". We also got a note from Allen saying that he had enjoyed himself, and wanting to sign on for the next group "if you'll have me".

If any readers feel competent to create safe and supportive settings, then I heartily recommend they try out group dice therapy themselves - I have been to many hundreds of therapy groups, but there is none I have enjoyed so much, or learnt so much from. For once, I have all the extra qualities that the blurb promised: I am indeed a fraction "more spontaneous, more creative, more sexual, more prosperous and even half an inch funnier". Ken and I set out to prove that a therapy group does not have to be grim to be therapeutic. Humour, therapy, rebirthing, dice-risks and drama make for an explosive mix. I think we got the formula about right.

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**COMMENT on 'Self-actualization is not self-indulgence' from Rod Farmer: 'Misinterpretations and Misconceptions of Maslow's Theory' (*Self and Society* March/April 1984. Vol XII No.2)**

I would like to comment on a small part of Rod Farmer's article on Maslow in the last edition of 'Self and Society'.

Farmer summarizes Maslow's theory and sets out to answer the criticisms commonly levelled against it. I am in full agreement with him, but suggest that he underestimates the criticism that self-actualization is self-indulgence and that he therefore too easily dismisses the charge. Denying it is not enough. He quotes Maslow's statement that: 'the self-actualizing person is loving and altruistic' as if it were a similar statement to 'the grass is green'. This ignores the very real conflict involved. Such a loving and altruistic state of being is difficult to achieve and difficult to maintain. It is even more difficult to communicate it to those whose perspective and framework of values make them resistant to understanding.

Such people are genuinely puzzled by the process whereby, as a self-actualizing person, I start out by going for what I want and end up loving and altruistic. And they (the critics) aren't the only ones with a problem. As the self-actualizer, I too have to struggle to keep focused on the humanistic beliefs which validate my process.

This is worth spelling out, not only for the sake of the critics, but also to counteract the impression that self-actualization happens overnight, in spite of Maslow's (and Farmer's) assertion to the contrary.