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SUBJECTIVE IMPRESSIONS OF BEING A STAFF MEMBER ON THE SOUTH WEST LONDON COURSE

I had some acquaintance with one or two of the other staff members before joining the part-time staff at South West London. Certainly, over a period of years, I had heard a great deal about the course from various bits of writing and from former students. In addition, my husband had been working on the course for some time and so I thought I knew what I was coming to. However, joining the planning weekend of the first pre-Diploma year, having missed the first day, was like starting to read Kafka half way through.

Some weeks prior to this experience, I and about ten others, had offered ourselves for selection as part-time members of staff on the course. That too had been a gruelling experience as we submitted ourselves to staff and students to be chosen or not. There was certainly a feeling which has not yet left me, of putting myself up for auction, making myself vulnerable. There is an important issue for me and I think for other staff which concerns playing the popularity stakes, offering workshops that sound exciting and attractive, and being vulnerable to popular opinion. Indeed, in situations where students can choose what they want to learn and who they want to learn it with, staff are less protected than in a conventional teaching situation. They may actually be in a position of not being chosen by anybody at a particular time. This may not be a reflection on the capabilities of any one member of staff but on the other hand it might be. Ordinary structured timetabling procedures normally camouflage the issues

of choice and preference. So perhaps it was fitting that these issues were around right at the point of selection and it is a good feeling to know that I was chosen, not just by those with whom I am to teach but also by those I was to teach. However, the experience itself was not an easy one and by the end I felt quite diminished. It seems important to have a look at this as it certainly set the mood in which I approached the work and even at first the building itself - during the first few weeks I felt quite overwhelmed and afraid as I approached the front door!

The selection was made on a warm June afternoon in Central London. Again, because of work at the Polytechnic, I arrived late and the process which was in effect, a large group experience, had commenced. I felt tempted to lapse into silence and watch what was happening. There were a number of reasons for this; partly this would have been a characteristic way for me to deal with, and work my way into, a new situation; I was also influenced by experiences of analytic work where for me at least, there was always a great deal going on in the silences and there were also agreeable memories of Quaker meetings where you waited for the spirit to move you before you spoke. However, different things were at stake here. I was aware that there was something that I wanted on offer. Despite the fact that I already had a relatively satisfying full-time job, I knew that this opportunity was immensely important to me. There was quite a struggle between an older, more passive self and a newer self which is capable of making forceful movements forward. The ability to use my energy in this way and go all out for what I wanted, was a victory for the new humanistic philosophies that have meant so much in recent years.

I think that to start with, I must have launched myself in rather aggressively, saying something about the fact that it is important to accept that we were there to compete with each other. (I was told later that I came over powerfully). The selectors specified some of their needs, such as community building, energy, a man on the staff (!). People took it in turns to say who they were and what they wanted, where they were from and what they thought they had to offer. Once again I was aware that I had tremendous energy. It was almost a glorious feeling to know that the energy was available to me when I needed it for something I really wanted. I spent some time saying that I was pretty good, had loads of energy and was very interested. By the end I felt pretty small, very insignificant, and convinced that I had not got the job. I couldn't get out of the building fast enough. However, by the time I found my train home, I had managed to start putting myself back together again, and by a process of elimination, work out that I might have been the fifth person of the

five to be chosen. It was good to be told by phone the next day that I had been chosen.

I believe I mentioned the Planning Weekend some paragraphs ago. It was really something! I was in an exhausted, exalted, drained state for over a week afterwards. About thirty people, staff and students, were there to plan their teaching and learning for the first year of a counselling course. The students didn't know each other and there were two new members of staff. People discussed their hopes, fears and expectations in pairs and then in larger and larger groups with the staff working together most of the time. Inevitably the emphasis was not on formal learning but on what people needed for themselves and for their personal development. Personal awareness, personal growth, workshops run by the students, bodywork, T.A., and Gestalt, were among the things eventually asked for. But in order to reach this point, people went over their lives looking at significant and important experiences and talking about these in small groups. This brought them to their learning needs and the ways in which they wanted to learn. The weekend was highly structured and the structure offered by the staff, mainly the year tutor. At one point, one group got so involved that they didn't come back until much later than planned, thereby putting various things out of gear. It was interesting to note that the two new members of staff were a bit thrown by this. I was all for going and getting them back, whereas the other person felt rather punitive towards them. It was an interesting test of our grasp of the emotional significance of self-directed learning for us as staff members. The other two members of the full-time staff tended to be much more *laissez-faire*.

I found the group work with the staff immensely important, both as a way of beginning to get to know them and then from the feeling of being known to start to feel more secure about moving out to the larger and more threatening group. The warmth and support from the staff were tremendously important at this stage. The reassurance of the unconditional positive regard offered to me was extraordinarily powerful. I felt the Rogerian influence to be very strong. The idea was to offer some resources, help people plan, offer structures and a safety net and leave them very much to get on with things. I was amazed at the sophistication and confidence of some people (much greater than my own at this stage) and watched leaders rise and fall. It was a strange and revealing experience later in the year to have people come and ask for help over quite simple things, when at the planning weekend they had seemed much stronger than I was. Others, at this stage were wanting to be quite dependent and despite all the publicity and explanations about the course, seemed to be expecting

a pre-planned timetable with the staff firmly in control. There were complaints about the chaos. However, despite the frustrations, we did manage to plan a term's work by Sunday, although the business of choosing small groups was still to come. I felt tremendous relief to be left with my home group, the staff group, to drink tea and chat. The larger group seemed immense, hostile, threatening and dangerous. I didn't like the students at this stage unless they had gone out of their way to make overtures towards me. I wasn't really capable of moving towards them.

Some of these feelings were around during the ordinary working year and came back at the start of each term, but they gradually lessened as I ran workshops that I was happy with and got good feedback from. Anything that came from a student indicating that I was good and worthwhile was very important as was the strong support from the staff group. Even hints of adverse criticism hurt but I was able to stand back from it and consider my actions. However, all this took time and I felt continually challenged as a person. The security I had gained from being for a long time in a safe place was rocked and I felt at different times unsure, diffident and unattractive. I wondered also about the effect of being in a community that was largely women and was reminded a bit of my school days. I realise that in recent years I have become more used to relating to men than women and hadn't thought much about relationships with women. However, relationships with women had certainly been of major importance during my school days and in my childhood home. Despite predominant feelings of regression when I found it hard to distinguish my role from that of the students, I was in touch with bits of my own power. However, it was hard at first to keep in touch with this and use it effectively - it seemed to me often that I was jarring and uncomfortable socially and just about everyone else seemed to be coping better than I was. The charisma and real and fantasied expertise of other staff members encouraged me to let myself feel helpless and weak.

One of the big plusses for me was my strong interest in everything that was going on. For example, there were regular staff meetings first of all with the other staff on the same year which served as a very useful way of clearing fantasies, reviewing the work and exchanging notes. There were also meetings with all the other staff - two of which took the form of residential weekends at a conference centre in Kent. These were important ways of relating to stimulating colleagues. They were exciting because of the forward planning, and thoughts of expansion that were going on and because I began to feel part of a thriving community which was working on difficult

interpersonal and policy issues. One staff meeting looked at the issue of jealousy and envy in the community and the important and difficult areas of the way the learning community relates to the college and the ILEA and to the external assessors. These are always around as ongoing issues which become very significant when a crucial problem such as finding new premises comes up.

An interesting aspect for me is the idea of the large group. I am aware of being influenced by analytic ideas when I want to use community meetings as a large group experience. I find myself in some disagreement with some staff who tend to want to make them into very structured 'safe' experiences. I have no idea where this will go but I am very interested in it as an idea.

Another important aspect is the mythology that is around, both about the past and the present. I feel sure, too, that students are influenced in their planning by ideas about traditions that may or may not exist. I know that I have fantasies about how some staff members relate to one another. I also realise that I can get quite paranoid about some colleagues and their power, particularly if I don't see them for a while.

Despite some diffidence I was also aware of a hard area of self-confidence so that when a vacancy for a full-time post came up I didn't have to consider for a moment whether or not I would apply. Ambivalent feelings came later when I knew I had been offered the job.

Getting the job confirmed my earlier feeling that it was to be very important for me to work on the course. Certainly I have been pleased to leave a path that had become well worn to a place where alongside the students I can experience excitement in learning and discover new ways of being with people.
