

## CROSS CULTURAL COMMUNICATIONS WORKSHOP - DUBLIN 1985

This year the annual Cross Cultural Communications Workshop was held in Dublin. I was lucky enough to be invited to attend as a staff member, my first time, joining an international team of staff drawn from Europe and North America, including Carl Rogers and Chuck Devonshire, director of the Centre for Cross Cultural Communication.

Almost 200 people met for a week together in a Dublin Hotel. They came from around twenty countries, including North and South America, Poland, Hungary, France, West Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Spain and Denmark. There was also a large contingent from Northern and Southern Ireland, and some from England, Wales and Scotland.

One of the most impressive aspects of the week for me was the fact that when people are determined to communicate, they will do so even against enormous odds. The large group met together for at least three hours every day, breaking into smaller encounter or option groups for the remainder of the time. It was at one of the large group meetings that the passionate issue of the situation in Northern Ireland arose. For almost three hours the various groups involved - Northern Irish Catholics and Protestants, Southern Irish and English - expressed their political and personal feelings. It was a stormy

time with a lot of rage and even verbal violence. After a while though, because the group had worked hard to produce a climate in which people were listened to and respected as individuals, there seemed to emerge the beginnings of understanding and acceptance between people. I am not claiming that anything was finally resolved, but people did have the real experience that where communication is facilitated people are often able to appreciate the humanness of the other side, and this to me is very hopeful. A broader aspect of this exchange was that because it was so centrally concerned with issues of power and control, other groups present could relate their own feelings and experiences. When it comes to issues such as these, many people have something to say including South Americans, Poles and Hungarians.

The small encounter group I facilitated on three occasions contained a similar mixture of nationalities. I will not forget when a Southern Irish woman expressed her resentment to me as an Englishman (the only one in the room) for the way the English had forced her to abandon her mother tongue - the Irish language. The remark was, "You have stolen the language of my heart", and this started off in me a whole new train of thought about how one group

when it overpowers another, robs them of so much of their freedom to be who they are. It was quite astonishing at times how the various linguistic and cultural groups found ways to share themselves as people and learn from each other once a safe environment was established.

Many other incidents come to mind . . . A young woman from an Iron Curtain country expressed her relief at being able to talk and be listened to. She demonstrated how it is for her at home by standing in silence for several minutes. And the silence was heard and understood by 200 people.

At a masculine/feminine group an Irish woman was able to share the guilt she felt for behaving in ways of which her Church would disapprove . . . And others were able to share some of their confusion and joy of their own sexuality . . .

At the education group people from all over the world shared the problems and successes of putting the principles of person centred education into practice in their schools and colleges.

In a pub one evening, with Irish music playing in the background, I talked for a long time with a Colombian woman who had worked in a South American womens' prison. She told how, using counselling and a form of psychodrama, she had enabled some of the women to regain something of their human dignity and self respect.

The large group went through a process of confusion and anger when it became apparent to some that the staff were not going to control the workshop . . . and to others that they were being controlled, even manipulated by the staff. The confusion and anger subsided when the issues were confronted and resolved openly. (Staff meetings were held in public and were videotaped).

Gradually, the large group found ways of taking care of conflicting needs and interests, a real community, albeit temporary, had been formed.

As each individual discovered that he or she would be listened to, and that there was the intention to understand as well as be understood, national boundaries began to disappear and people began to relate on a close personal level.

I know that for some the process I am describing is hard to understand, and to others it is even naive. Can groups such as this really take control for themselves, or are they always being subtly manipulated by those who take more power for themselves? Can cultural, national and political differences really be heard and understood by others used to treating them with suspicion and hostility? Is there really any point in sharing emotions and feelings with others, or is it best to keep these things to yourself? Do events such as these have any effect, short or long term on the outside world? Are they just another example of the self

indulgent, articulate middle classes agonising over situations which do not directly threaten them?

I do not claim to know the answers to these questions, but the workshop gave me some clues:

When a definable psychological climate based on empathy and respect is established, individuals seem freer to express themselves and are more able to understand and accept others.

Trust is hard to establish, and needs to be worked at. When a minimal level of trust is established people are more likely to communicate with each other in ways which seem to transcend the superficial quality of many day to day transactions.

People like, want and need to be accepted as individual persons, not judged or evaluated by others.

People like, want and need to communicate with others directly, to be heard and understood, and to hear and understand others.

National and linguistic boundaries need not be insurmountable obstacles to real meaningful exchanges between people if the intention to communicate is present.

Political and cultural differences between people can be made more 'human', though this process is often difficult and sometimes seems impossible.

Previous experience from these workshops shows that contact between people is maintained afterwards. Various action groups and consciousness raising groups continue several years after a similar workshop in Brazil, for example.

Emotions are part of being a person. When deeply felt emotions are shared in a climate of trust and acceptance, people move closer together, are more understanding of each other and of themselves.

Although it is a struggle at first, even a very large group of people can create between themselves the kind of structure that satisfies most people most of the time.

The desire on the part of 'staff' to control, manipulate or direct the behaviour of others says more about their insecurities than it does about the abilities of others to reach their own conclusions and do things in ways which are personally meaningful to them.

When 'staff' are secure enough to drop professional roles and facades and show themselves as people, others seem more likely to trust them and can learn from them without feeling manipulated or controlled.

These are just some of the things I learned at this workshop. I came away tired but optimistic. This small example of the liberating and creative power of the person centred approach in action served to

strengthen my conviction that people can create for themselves the kind of climate that leads to respect and understanding of others. This kind of Humanistic approach has something very important to

teach us. Will we learn the lessons before it is too late?

Next year, the workshop will be held in Budapest. I hope to see you there.

Tony Merry  
August 1985

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### **Liquid of Love**

Follow me down to the source  
Of the pool that is your being.  
In the juices of your life  
I will dip my tongue and drink.  
When I've supped of your experience  
I'll bring you the taste of your self.

Hold me up to your face.  
Look well into my eyes,  
For there you'll see your image  
Mirrored by the inside  
Of one who knows your shadows  
And lights the dark of corners.

Close away the emptiness  
Of thoughts that come in words  
And through my dilated senses  
You and self perceive.

For full of your scent  
I smell of you  
Full of your taste  
I drink from you  
And knowing your feel  
I am touched by you.

**P. Efford**

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