
THE POWER AND THE DEVIL

or

How to Kiss a Frog Good Night

by

Hans Lobstein

Self-help does not necessarily mean you are on your own. I remember once a co-counselling session with a man with a hearing aid, in the middle of which I saw him play around with it, and I suddenly thought he had switched it off and hadn't heard a word I had been saying. I felt very despondent, useless, rejected. I had wasted all this effort and for nothing. All this digging into myself, all these observations and discoveries, all carried away by the wind. Fortunately I found that I was wrong. He had only been adjusting the volume, not surprisingly . . . but it did teach me the invaluable lesson of how important the listener is, however unresponsive. Jenny used to call him the silent witness. And the same applies when I work on my dreams by myself, trying to find a message in them: I miss what there is, I am so very good at escaping facing myself, avoiding to look. I don't know what it is, why another person is so important. Why it is important that I am known, heard, recognised . . .

Self-help groups would be better named mutual help or peer groups. The best group I was ever part of met one weekend a month in each other's houses for about 18 months. And that was some 15 years ago and has stayed with me all these years. There was no fee, no leader. I remember once I met Sarah at Liverpool Street Station to take the train to the house of one of our number in Essex. I was very unwilling to go. For two weeks previously I had been sick, headaches, colds, anything to escape. I just about managed to drag myself along. I knew that the previous meeting had got me to what seemed like the cliff edge of a deep dark abyss and somehow I escaped. But I knew that it wouldn't take many minutes before I had to face it again, and again. I don't remember in detail just what happened that night except that I dithered on the brink all night. I was not allowed to let go and get away again. I remember that, time and time again, I said I don't know what else I

could do. I think I have done everything I know, but the group, gently and patiently kept me looking and staying with it. In the end I think I must have jumped, and it was all right. I learned more from these self-help groups than any others, however well led. We all helped each other face ourselves. Some people dropped out during those 18 months; some new ones joined; some fell in love; some fell out of love; some went abroad; others returned but a core of about six or seven stayed and carried it through.

The hardest of all is initiative and motivation. Conflict and energy, I tell my students, is like mass and energy, interchangeable. I would like to have an equation, the more conflict between different parts in ourselves, the less energy; the more conflicts can be resolved, the more energy is palpably liberated. I have seen it happen in front of my eyes.

I get letters every week from people all over the country wanting to start self-help groups. Mostly they are not for their own personal development (not many people are in a place where they can admit that that has any significance for them personally), but to help themselves with specific problems, physical health, or a drink or drug problem, or someone in their family. There are literally hundreds of such groups all over the country, national and local. Lists can be obtained locally from the Citizen's Advice Bureau, or local Voluntary Services Council, or from

the Social Services Department of the local authority. If all else fails, write to the National Council for Voluntary Organisations for lists of local contacts. But in the final analysis, you can start your own. I shall be very glad to get you started, with publicity (I have lists of some 50 weekly and monthly publications many of which have free listings of forthcoming events) and where and how to find resources and finance. It is easier, in my experience, to find money than it is to find dedicated people who want to do something. Every time I say that at a public meeting I get disbelieving groans from the audience. Local health visitors are often involved in self-help groups. Many local organisations have newsletters which will publish your requirements and dates of meetings. Local church halls are often available, sometimes free. If you send out circulars to local newsletter editors, you need to say exactly what you want them to do with them, to publish the contents, to circularise them to their members, or else they may end up in the waste paper basket.

There are three very good films as discussion starters, if that is what you want:

1. *The Counselling Approach with Grahame Cooper*. Basic counselling skills and how they are taught in a particular setting, with some interesting case stories of pregnancy counselling.

2. *A Touch of Sensitivity* a film documentary shown originally on BBC-TV Horizon programme, dealing with the importance of touch in young primates, and the consequences of touch deprivation, with a sequence on work with very disturbed children at Hill End Hospital where the familiar techniques of encounter groups are used with remarkable results. But the film also shows scenes of animal experiments which may be disturbing to many viewers.

3. *The Centre of the Storm* now obviously dating some ten or more years, is a film of a class of young children divided against themselves. It has aroused a lot of anger and controversy in its time, leading to the sacking of the teacher who so bravely tried to teach anti-racism to her class. I use the film more for its blatant manipulation of young people's feelings, and how they so readily collude. When I ask 14-15 year olds how they feel about adults lying to children ("I lied to you yesterday" says the teacher in one sequence), they look at me blandly. "But they always do, sir, we are used to it . . .". And when we talk about choice and control over their own lives, they get all excited, but the teachers don't like it much, or at least some do, but some look askance.

All three films can be hired from the Concord Film Council, 201 Felixtowe Road, Ipswich, Suffolk, IP3 9BJ. Public showings of any of

these films always attract a good number. Most schools have projection facilities and will let halls. Church halls are also available in many areas and churches are often eager to help start community self-help groups. Many churches have various groups attached to them, such as sisterhood or brotherhood groups, and writing to all the churches in a local community with offers of a speaker and film, will bring many invitations. Problems then arise from the success and demand so engendered. The most effective way of carrying on is to spread the load, to delegate. Every group will produce one or two people willing to take on some of the work to keep contact with the rest, to become local contact persons and possibly the nucleus of a new group. It just depends what you want.

Sometimes I draw a line on a blackboard and I put mental health at one end and mental illness at the other. I ask the audience to tell me where they are, and if there is anyone among them who thinks they are a hundred percent healthy. I remember talking to trainee nurses in a mental hospital and one of them raised her hand. We had an interesting discussion and I have been wondering since what became of her. I usually put myself somewhere half-way along the line, quite capable of moving up or down along the line. What stops me moving all the way? That's another good discussion point. I have always

thought that we move fairly easily along this line until I took on a group of day patients who were attending the local day hospital for mental illness. We met once a week. Many of them were highly intelligent and perceptive. Most of them suffered from depression. We regularly did some co-counselling work with each other in pairs, and what struck me most was how little they were able to give each other attention. Normally I would expect even with beginners an attention span of about five minutes. They could hardly manage one minute. After some six weeks we managed to extend the attention span to about three or four minutes, and slowly we managed to extend this further. It made me realise how precious it is, being able to give attention to someone else, and how easily it is lost. One man couldn't find anywhere to live. We did a role-change exercise. "I want a bed-sitter of my own" he says somewhat belligerently to his putative landlady, "I am registered with so many agencies but every time I go to see a place it seems to have just been let". "Do you really want a room?" we ask him. He looks bewildered. Change places and be the landlady. He was a good landlady. He knew all the answers how to refuse, But he couldn't see what he was doing or why they should want to put him off. We did this many times over. Then we had someone else play each role and he just watched himself being brutally mimicked, spied, lampooned. He cried and suffered and we shared our

suffering and pain. "Yes, I know, this is what I am like, but what can I do?" Three weeks later he had found a room. "Do you think what we did the other day had any bearing, helped you at all" we asked him. "Oh no, of course not, it had nothing to do with it".

For some reason there are few such mental health self-help groups in a community and this may well be a field worth exploring further. Equally there are few groups for unemployed people specifically, to help themselves. There are some, run by the Claimants' Union and such bodies, but most of them are angled at the rights and benefits which are available, and less at ways of coping with the loss of status or loneliness or marital problems and violence, all of which are said to be more prevalent among unemployed people.

But there are many other groups which already exist. I tend to divide them into two sections, those who help their own members, like tenant associations or patient's groups or ethnic/minority groups, and those who help others, like the Red Cross or associations for the disabled, or for handicapped children.

One type of group that many people are keen to join is a massage group, but for some reason, once the novelty wears off, they don't seem to last very long. I would like to see more groups starting locally for self-employment, partnership and

co-operative work groups, service co-ops, house repairs and restoration, housing associations. There are some organisations willing to help with these groups. All these are 'doing' groups, rather than 'being' groups. For some reason the former flourish while the latter are much more difficult to sustain.

If anyone would want to start a local group such as massage, woman-man relationship workshops, art encounter, co-counselling, hypnotherapy, or even just a fun group (why do some people have more fun than others and some don't have any at all?), these are the most popular, I shall be glad to help, at least to get the first one going.

Other organisations which have information and may help:

National Council for Voluntary Organisations, 26 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3HU

"HELP! I need someone". A directory of 700 associations £2 from Kimptons Bookshop, 205 Great Portland Street, London W1N 6LR

"Hello, can I help you?" £1 from Mutual Aid Centre, 18 Victoria Park Square, London @2 9PF

Directory of Social Change and Fundraising Handbook, 9 Mansfield Place, London NW3

Share Community, Alexandra House, 140 Vattersea Park Road, London SW11 4NB

Self-Help Spotlight, 170 Kingston Road, Merton Par, London SW19 3NX

Industrial Buildings Preservation Trust, 359 The Strand, London WC2 or Vivian Church, 99 Southwark Street, London SE1 0JF (renovating buildings for community use)

Land reclamation for community use: CLAWS, Val Fountain, Coldharbour Works, 245a Coldharbour Lane, London SW9 8RR (Tel. (01) 274 7700)

Self-healing groups - run by local Health Visitors.

Co-operative Development Agency, 20 Albert Embankment, London SE1 (01) 211 3000)

Manuela Sykes, Co-op Work Groups, 8 Sussex Street, London SW1.

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