
OUR CULTURE MAKES ZOMBIES OF US

by

Jerome Liss

Here is what happens. I go into the subway. Most of the people are staring into the air, looking at the deodorant ads, or else looking down at the ground, doing nothing.

I visit some friends: the children are watching cartoons on the television. It's 5:00 in the afternoon. I leave some hours later. It's night time. The children are still sitting in front of the television. In fact, they had eaten without moving. "Be quiet!", one cries to another.

I go to the taxi stand. There is a long line of taxis waiting. Each unoccupied driver is either looking vaguely about or else hunched in front of a newspaper generally open at the sports section.

I go to the bank. There's a long line. It's like that every day. I know that the wait will be at least twenty minutes, and the other people waiting also know this. I take out some notes from an article I'm finishing and pencil in some additions. I've learned now to do this while standing up. The other people on the line are looking around a bit, or looking at the teller, or looking down. Some are patient, others impatient, but they are all waiting and doing nothing, while I'm waiting and doing something.

I enter a familiar building. The night watchman is there in his customary chair, his customary crossword puzzle in his lap. He's at it for hours, and when he stops, he sits with his arms folded, looking at the wall.

I ask a number of clients who are in psychotherapy because of difficulties in expressing themselves, "What do you usually do after the evening meal?" Many of them respond, "Nothing", or else, "I watch television".

The common denominator of these experiences is the encounter with **cultural passivity**. People spend their time "doing nothing", which often means spending time in passive consumption of a mass media product. How can we understand the reasons for this widespread void that we call a "cultural desert?"

I propose that this problem of **personal** passivity is linked to **political** passivity. Here is the connection: People remain **politically** passive in front of the television set unable to influence the course of society's institutions. (The origins of this situation will be developed in a moment).

In a parallel way, people remain **personally** passive in front of their television sets, unable to organize and realize their creative and artistic potential.

In other words, while we began with the problem of **passivity** during one's **free time**, we have jumped to the problem of **political passivity**.

Political passivity? But what are we supposed to do?" That's exactly the question for which we have developed, as a culture, **no response**: so we remain in front of the television.

The **potential** solution is **active participation**. Because politics means influencing our common destiny, this requires that we **act with others**. Therefore we propose that **mutual participation groups** with people actively participating with like-minded others creates the most appropriate means for political action. And this is exactly what does **not** occur when we are millions in front of our television sets **almost every night**.

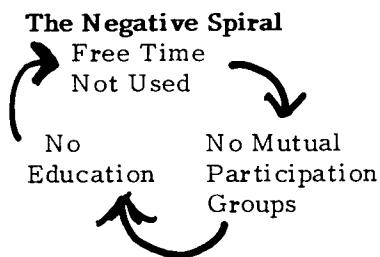
People may not agree with this **jump** from **private life** to **politics**. I would like to spell out the intimate connection that I see between these two realms of our existence; the reasoning goes as follows: in order to master our **free time** and use it for **creative action**, whether the goal be personal or political, depends upon our receiving an **education** for acquiring **the necessary capacities**. But we have not received an education for making our free time worthwhile. Why is that? Because

we have not influenced our cultural and social institutions, whether in this domain or in any other, and this failure is due to the absence of effective "citizens' groups" or Mutual Participation groups. The large majority of people have never received training for organizing themselves in order to make an impact upon their surrounding world. Thus there is little know-how for creating effective Citizens' Groups - that is, for creating organizations, unions or clubs built up by Mutual Participation - and the ones that do exist receive little support from others.* The upshot is that we **passively** sit at home and like sponges soak up whatever is produced for millions of people just like us stranded in the same boat of **do nothingness**.

The logic of our argument creates a circle. (It may feel like a labyrinth.

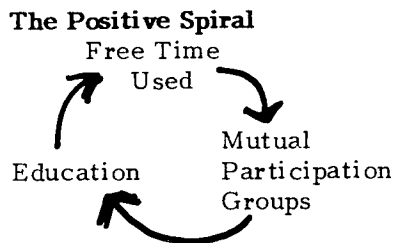
1. We have not used our free time to create mutual participation groups that can influence our institutions. (**We watch television instead**).
2. Our institutions do not respond to our needs for **education**.
3. Without education, we remain without special capacities. Thus we sit mute and ignorant, whether the task be to create effective Mutual Participation groups with others or to use our free time actively and creatively when we are alone.

*A list of potential Citizens' Mutual Participation Groups will be found in the Appendix.



**The More He Tried,
The Worse It Got**

How does the **passivity** phenomenon manifest itself on a personal level when we are **at home**? The following **example** occurred during my psychotherapy work. I have recently been working on the **Free Time Project** with several groups. The goal of the **Free Time Project** is to **evaluate** each person's use of his or her **free time**, and thus examine the ways in which we **sabotage** ourselves when failing to live up to our inner promises. A striking illustration of the internal, psychological problem in using **free time** was demonstrated by Robert. Robert demonstrated for us his paralysis and confusion when attempting to write in his personal journal; he sat down with the clear intention of recording the dialogue he had shared with his wife the night before. His first thought was, "Why didn't I write down this dialogue last night, when it was fresh in my memory?" He felt a great deal of **anguish** when confronted by the "holes" in his memory. He then became increasingly tensed up, as if the more he searched in his memory, the less his memory became available. His tension and discomfort were mounting, and he announced that this familiar feeling often blocked his initiatives and



discouraged his previous attempts to use diary-writing as a **free time Project**.

At a moment that Robert seemed desperate, I asked him to push his right index finger, which was "like a pencil", against the empty paper in order to show the accumulated frustration he was feeling, and to continue pushing until something came to mind. Robert did so, his breathing became deeper, and suddenly, after trembling, grunting and sweating, he made the **connection**. He remembered being seven years old and taking a test at school; during this exam his memory suddenly became blank. The anguish he was now reliving was a repetition of this overwhelming feeling of helplessness and defeat. This was the same feeling that cropped up whenever he began a task involving self-discipline, even if that task was to paint or to write or to practise an instrument. In other words, this feeling blocked his **free time** projects, even if the goals and means were creative and decided upon by himself.

The point is that many of us - I might even say **most of us** - are like Robert. We have been blocked by earlier defeats, and each time that we begin a new project, relying upon

our own energy generator rather than upon an external authority who tells us what we must do, we become blocked once again. The memory of submission and defeat washes away our enthusiasm and pleasure before a new undertaking. So we have given up and return to bottle feeding, that is, to mass media consumption.

The key problem, as far as I see it, is a problem with **authority**. To undertake a creative task is too closely associated with going to school, working for good marks to please the teacher or parent, needing to show perfection or some other goal which is too high to attain. If I **propose** to myself to walk up as much of a mountain as possible, and then I keep my eyes focused on the final never-attainable 100 meters of a vertical icy slope, I will never focus with confidence on the 300 meters of gently upsloping terrain that remains just in front of me and which can serve as my first objective. "Shoot too high and you achieve nothing", also restates this same theme.

Also connected to our inner rebellion against authority, we can react negatively to the inner command, "Get it done!", "Practise those first chords!", "Stay with it at least an hour a day!" "You can do better!", and so on. These are fundamentally positive messages as long as we resist their call for perfection. **Inner commands** can help point the way for developing discipline and concentration, capacities that are necessary for long-term creative work and development. But such inner commands can become confused

*from T.S. Eliot's **The Hollow Men**.

with the negative authoritarian messages that we heard from our parents and teachers when we were young. We rebelled against our parents' and teachers' dogmatic messages in order to save the core of our individual personalities, in order to avoid being **crushed** by the big boot of the boss. Thus we come out of this battle still feeling **ourselves**, our **authenticity**. But **now**, when such authority-sounding messages come from our inner awareness and the decision to initiate self-determined creative projects, we show that we are still conditioned, like wound-up dolls, by our habit of **refusal** and **rebellion**. So we sit frozen in the living-room, immersed in our indecision, or we take a cup of coffee in the kitchen, puzzled by our immobility and mysterious hesitation. Our conscious determination, rational and forward-looking, has pointed us toward the creative horizon, but the heavy baggage of authority-and-rebellion stops the spontaneous act and the once delectable goal turns sour. We are the "hollow men", as T.S. Eliot said so simply.

We live in "the wasteland".
We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion. *

Creative Projects

As a tiny antidote against this black situation, this cultural desert which cannot quench our thirst for deep living and growth, there are a

number of **creative projects** that some people have found useful.

1. Traditional creative modes that will never be outmoded: Creative writing (poetry, fiction, thoughtful analysis, research), playing a musical instrument (alone and with others), painting, designing, sculpting, modelling, craft projects like jewelry making, self-designed furniture building, weaving, self-designed clothing creation, and so on.
2. New Creative Models: Journal writing - biographical, free associative, analytical, fantasy-oriented; words mixed with nonsense sounds, pure nonsense sounds, automatic writing, written prayer, unsent letters (and sent ones as well). Painting and designing: to music, to poetry, representing dreams, using raw materials (colored sand, colored beads or glass fragments), adding to our production objects found-in-the-street (a' la Marcel Duchamps); creating three-dimensional objects using two-dimensional picture, collages with magazine cut-outs and other materials, abstract forms with pliable wire, etc. (See bibliography for Books on Creativity in the Appendix).
3. Creative Physical and Psycho-physical Exercises: Jogging, Creative running, home-modified aerobic exercises, Bagwan Rajneesh's Dynamic Meditation,

Up Against the Wall,* Speaking to ourselves out loud with a tape-recorder. (There are structured and unstructured variations for this as for all methods. The structured methods, in contrast, allow us to explore a greater diversity of themes, but with less intensive investigation of any new ones. Evidently a combination of structured and unstructured methods creates the most comprehensive program for self-exploration and creativity).

Creativity With Others: The Psychotheater Method. There are countless creativity methods that people can practise together. I will describe the Psychotheater method because of its potential to both **give discipline** and **permit spontaneity**, while **confronting a theme pertinent to everyone**.

In essence, Psychotheater involves the development of a sketch or short play which will interest almost everyone working. The crucial step is taken in the second stage: Each person in the public is invited to **replay** the same scene in any way. There is no model; originality is encouraged.

The opening scene can be two liners: for example, if a group of couples want to enjoy an evening of creativity together while exploring the theme, "What is Love?", the two

* In this exercise we face the wall, scream at ourselves with a cushion in our mouth, hit another cushion which we hold against the wall, develop a theme which begins as a basic phrase - "What do I really want?", "What makes me afraid?", "Whom do I want to please?", or simply, "Live!" We repeat the basic phrase until we come to free associations that we scream out, as if our unconscious minds are deaf despite our wish to hear ourselves.

initial actors of the Psychotheater piece can start out with the most simple phrases possible:

She: You don't really love me!
 He: How can you say that? I do love you!

(What might they say after? What would other couples say after? In a positive atmosphere of **no criticism**, but **appreciation for each one's contributions**, people can play out their fantasies and realities. And since audience members then replace the people on the stage (in the middle of the living room floor), **everybody participates**, and creativity becomes a collective process.

The purpose of this article is to stimulate the reader to think over more deeply his relation to society's "cultural desert" and evaluate whether he or she remains **passive** like an obedient **consumer**, when living each day's moments of **free time**. "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in our selves, if we are underlings". Can we take our destinies (and our **free time**) in our own hands in order to propel us to our starry horizons, or at least to our "interior gardens", and if not that, then at least to live out for ourselves the joy of moving the brush across the canvas, of scribbling across the page, of banging the typewriter keys, of whispering into the tape recorder - all to reflect our experience and discover its illuminations.

WHAT PROBLEMS CAN MUTUAL PARTICIPATION GROUPS HELP YOU SOLVE?

PROBLEMS	RESPONSES
spending too much money	Live with Less Money Group
feeling emotionally rattled	Self Help Group
lonely	Self-Run Encounter Groups
dissatisfaction in your couple relationship	New Resources for Couples Group
unhappy in your job	Find Meaningful Work Group
just lost your job	Living Positively When Unemployed Group
danger of the company you work for going broke	Workers' Replanning Group
sitting in a chair all day at the office	Daily Exercise Group (organized at the company during work hours)
needing baby-sitting help	Parent-Run Baby-Sitting Pool
poor educational standing at your child's school	Child Education Improvement Group
needing help to raise your children	Self-Run Parents' Guidance Group
paying too much rent	Tenants Rights Group
feeling suffocated by the city	Rent a House in the Country for Weekends and Holidays Groups
feeling isolated from other families	Family Network
wanting to live with others	Creating a Community Group
having sexual problems	Know your Body Group

suffering from the emotional trauma of marital separation or divorce	People Separated and Separate People Group
(for a woman) wanting to get closer to other women	Women's Liberation Group
(for a man) wanting to get closer to other men	Men's Consciousness-Raising Group
wanting to share experiences and ideas with colleagues	Independent Professional Association
wanting to write articles with others in a new speciality	Creating a Magazine Group
wanting to spread alternative medicine approaches	Holistic Medicine Centre
(as a physically handicapped person) feeling frustrated by society's attitudes	Group for a Decent Life for Handicapped People
(for an adolescent) feeling frustrated in a subservient position (at home, at school or at work)	Adolescent Liberation Group
(for a prisoner or member of a prisoner's family or friend) aware of the crime-inducing and humiliating conditions within prisons	Prisoners Riggths Association
(for mental hospital patients and ex-patients) feeling oppressed by mental hospital conditions	Mental Hospital Patient's Association
(for people over 65) aware of society's negligence toward the needs of older people	Equal Opportunity for the Aged Association
(for soldiers) indignant at the restriction upon rights while doing military service	Soldiers' Rights Group
(for minority group members) frustrated by social prejudice and oppression	Minority Rights Association
(for welfare benefits claimants) frustrated by inadequate aid from the government	Welfare Claimants' Union
couples with mixed racial or national origin	Couples of Different Origin Group
needing emotional support or wishing to defend y our rights as a homosexual	Gay Liberation Group
indignant that men can physically beat up and humiliate women	Refuge for Battered Women Center
(for artists) frustrated by limited opportunities for exhibiting and selling your work	Artists' Collective Gallery
(for actors) frustrated by limited opportunities to work in the theater	Theater Collective
wanting to integrate work and creativity with friends	Restaurant-Theatre-Library Collective
Wanting to learn a new craft (or to teach one)	Self-Run Craft Group
wanting to build your own house	Build your Own House Group
feeling indignant that you pay high prices for poor quality goods, or that dangerous products are sold without precautionary labels	Consumers' Protection Association
having a specific illness (like diabetes) that makes you live differently from others	Living Well with Diabetes Group (or with Asthma, Eczema, Poor Vision, etc, or having a Colostomy etc.
suffering from terminal cancer	Facing Death Without Fear Group
being a parent of a child with malignant cancer	Parents' Sharing Group
(fathers and mothers) raising children alone	One-Parent Families Group
children unhappy at home	Children Needing Love Group
children unhappy at school	Children Searchinga Real Education Group
people with a marital partner who must travel frequently	Partners Who Stay Home Alone Group
wanting to protect the natural environment against pollution and industrial growth	Ecology Group

wanting to study and promote the principles of self-direction	Mutual Participation Study Group
concerned about police brutality	Citizens' Supervision of the Police Committee
finding the nuclear energy program dangerous for the future	Alternative Energy Association
upset by people tortured in many countries throughout the world	Amnesty International
worried by international rivalries that could create war	Creating a Direct Contact between the Peoples of Two Nations Group

Appendix II

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