

# THE SELF-AWARENESS MOVEMENT —A CRITIQUE

by

Chris Scott

*"Many of us for some years have been increasingly concerned about the political naivety of many practitioners and 'gurus' in guidance and counselling. Exhortations to self-actualise, self-realise and take charge of our destinies can sound depressingly hollow to those denied access to the pathways of privilege". (1)*

## **Introducing Sam**

It has taken ten years, about the usual time for social currents to reach us from the U.S. for what Tom Wolfe characterized as the 'Me decade' to reach these shores (2). Revitalized, and assuming various guises: personal growth, human potential, consciousness raising, the 'Me decade' is enjoying a new lease of life. At an alarming rate workshops spring up, courses are run, all designed to help get us in touch with ourselves. In groups, in pairs, individually, with trainers, facilitators, co-ordinators and self-styled gurus - self awareness is sweeping the country, and psychologists, educators and counsellors have for the most part embraced the movement uncritically (3). But the Self Awareness Movement (SAM), whilst it may offer hope and light for many, is not without its dangers. It is to those potential dangers that this article is addressed.

Whilst there are considerable differences amongst the schools and practitioners of SAM; they all embody, despite their particular novelties, certain values, ideas, and on occasions techniques, which they share in common. These shared and interconnected themes which I have listed here, and will examine briefly in turn I shall call the:

## **Seven Pillars of Sam Wisdom:**

- (i) Back to "nature" call.
- (ii) Experience as what "really counts".
- (iii) Being in the "now".
- (iv) The wisdom of the body.
- (v) Emotional intensity.
- (vi) Communication.
- (vii) Personal Responsibility.

Embodied in a whole range of counselling and therapy approaches including Gestalt, Transactional Analysis, Primal Therapy, and

Rogerian based Client-Centred approaches, these themes provide the hallmark of SAM.

(i) **The Back to "Nature" Call**

A common theme in SAM is "be natural", "back to basics". The problem of course is how? Besides, what exactly is natural and basic? A vaguely romantic conception of living permeates SAM, a sense of the essential goodness of human nature. It is as though we need only to shed ourselves of our conditioning and cultural heritage for all to be well. This theme of the essential goodness and innocence of childhood is echoed in the poetry of Wordsworth. In the counselling field it finds expression in the work of Rogers. For Rogers, arguably the guru of SAM's many gurus, "persons have a **basically** positive direction".

These sorts of claims might strike the more cynical of us as more than a little naive. As Clare says "it seems a little disingenuous not to say superficial to relegate the horrors of the human condition - Auschwitz, Hiroshima, My Lai, Jonestown to the outcome of social conditioning". (4)

There is a certain irony in the notion of teaching us to be natural. But SAM literature is full of techniques for getting back to nature, feeling our feelings, developing spontaneity.

Esalen, a favourite watering hole of many SAM gurus even has a special section reserved for children where adults can learn what it's like to be natural. As I shall argue later this 'nature' theme is closely linked with

another one, that of personal responsibility. Perhaps it is not surprising that a movement that encourages a return to the special and innocent qualities of children, risks the danger of sharing with children the luxury of not being held to any standards other than their own. Thus back to nature can become a rallying call for self-indulgence coupled with social irresponsibility.

(ii) **Experience as What "Really Counts"**

This second theme of SAM is closely related to the first. It finds expression particularly in the work of Gestalt and Rogerian therapies, Transactional Analysis and assertiveness: to cut through the "verbalizations" and get to "feelings" or more crudely "gut reactions".

Feelings are what count according to SAM - trusting intuitive experience, rather than rational intellectual argument. Rogers puts it thus "the touchstone of validity is my own experience". If Rogers was not the first to claim the primacy of experience over intellect, there can be little doubt that his approach did much to turn people away from rational critical enquiry to the point of anti-intellectualism. Thus the authors of one major Gestalt text see intellectualizing as a form of "word-disease". (5) SAM provides us with assurances that we can get in touch with our 'real' selves, and fulfill ourselves simply by feeling our feelings. This anti-intellectualism reaches a peak with the Eastern derivative versions of SAM especially yoga and TM where not infrequently the claims made for

meditation and relaxation techniques are far from modest.

Those of us who argue that feelings do not exist in a vacuum but are related to particular objects, situations, and people are invariably accused of being defensive and intellectualizing, and incapable of understanding since we have not made the experiential journey to find the 'real me'. Meanwhile a focus on feelings, is exalted to the level of a creed, and is offered as a panacea for everything from ulcers to international conflict. (6)

(iii) **Being in the "now"**

Clearly linked to the previous theme is the notion that what is important is the here-and-now. Nowhere is this rallying cry more strongly held than in the Gestalt movement and its guru Perls. For Perls the equation is simple:

*Now = experience = awareness  
= reality. (7)*

'Nowness' is inextricably linked with the intuitive mode, emphasizing spontaneity and feeling over intellect and reasoning. It finds particular expression in various forms of group dynamics, whereby group process is seen to be of value in itself without reference to broader social aims or issues. Unfortunately for those whose here-and-now is abject poverty and misery, homelessness, starvation and ill health, SAM gurus invariably have little to offer. Exercises designed to increase spontaneity and put us in touch with the here and now simply barely scratch the surface of the structural inequalities, particu-

larly those mediated through race, sex and social class, that pervade society. Two of Perls favourite sayings "Don't think, feel" and "lose your mind and come to your senses", are not just an assault upon reason, they display the social and political insensitivity of SAM gurus everywhere.

(iv) **The Wisdom of the Body**

This important SAM theme has obvious links with earlier ones. Again whilst techniques vary with different schools the overall aim is the same - to put us in touch with ourselves. Bodies are real, we are told, gut reactions are real. Thinking and social structures and norms and rules that shape thinking apparently are not. Let your body talk.

So where does SAM's body awareness take us? In some cases it is, no doubt, highly beneficial. Most of us in the western world eat too much, and exercise too little. But when we examine some of the grandiose claims of body workers with respect to the benefits of physiological self-mastery, we run into problems. Lowen's "Bioenergetics" is a good example, offering solutions not just to particular individual problems but also a myriad of social problems. Stress reduction apparently can provide the answer to everything from heart attacks to poor work habits, and crime. Rarely are we offered any evidence to support such claims. More importantly, there is a danger that by focusing inward on the body we ignore the socio-political aspects of health, illness, and well-being. Thus the title of a recent book "Depression - The way

of **your** prison" (8) (my emphasis) fails for the most part to examine the extent to which depression is deeply rooted in the wider social structure. (9)

Whether your preference is for TM, primal therapy, Gestalt, Rogerian or other SAM variant, the emphasis is always on changing the individual. The idea that society may be 'sick' rather than the person rarely seems to enter SAM's head. Instead SAM body work **interiorizes** - focusing on our breathing, posture, or muscle patterns for what they might reveal.

#### (v) **Emotional Intensity**

It is no accident that much of SAM's literature is contained in books with such titles as 'Joy', and 'Pleasure'. The theme of emotional intensity, of the peak experience is a common one in SAM. The idea is that to achieve true awareness our emotions must have a special quality and extremes of emotion are preferable to moderation it seems, even when the emotion is pain.

Whilst Maslow might be the guru of the potential possibilities of 'peak moments', it is with Janov, it seems, that pain really becomes the way for changing the person and therefore (since SAM logic invariably operates in this way) - changing the world. "The driving businessman, the narcotics addict, the homosexual" he tells us, "all share stored up primal pains (needs and feelings repressed and denied by consciousness) surging for release". (10)

The problem with the joy through pain argument is that once again it is individualistic in the extreme.

There is in the SAM literature little analysis of the **social** causes of pain and joy. Once again we are lured into a microscopic examination of our inner selves. Joy through collective effort, through the achievement of significant social goals, is not part of SAM's search for personal ecstasy.

#### (vi) **Communication**

Communication, particularly non-verbal communication is an important element in SAM, and all SAM gurus preach the value of communication whether with ourselves, each other, or even cosmic forces. Better communications, SAM says, means better relating. But **what** you are relating about, it seems is not important. What is important is - are you a good communicator? The danger here is that the process becomes one of learning content-neutral skills, and there are innumerable exercises in the counselling literature to develop these communication skills.

Schur suggests that the dangers of SAM's particular focus on communication are twofold. Firstly, the focus on form means that content may be ignored - for example: never mind the fact that he told me he is committing incest, did I nod my head at appropriate times? This is, I trust, an exaggerated example that has no substance in counselling reality. This idea though that goals and ends matter less than means is a core feature of SAM. Secondly, better relating **with** the other is turned to better relating **than** the other.

Assertiveness training can embrace both these dangers. Here a content free interpersonal skill is taught that can be used supposedly in any context. But in overcoming manipulation of us the danger is that we may begin to manipulate others. A more serious criticism is the way AT can turn out to be just another form of adjustment psychology, i.e. locating problems in individuals (who are 'passive' and 'inhibited') whilst society once again is let off the hook.

### (vii) Responsibility

SAM's views on responsibility have already been referred to in the discussion of the back to nature, return to childhood theme. SAM's view usually is that nobody is responsible for us but ourselves, and therefore others are responsible for themselves and we cannot be responsible for them. These views taken together add up to arguably, **not** responsibility but wholesale **irresponsibility**. In an ideal world we should not have to think of others but the grim reality for many is that basic needs - food, shelter, warmth simply are not met. **Social** responsibility implies moving from independence to interdependence and SAM's attitude on responsibility can sound like a convenient way of burying our head in the sand when confronted with the disadvantaged and less privileged sections in society - the disabled, chronic sick, the poor, the elderly.

We should not be surprised that it is in the U.S. that SAM's notion of individual responsibility finds strongest expression. It dovetails nicely with the ideology of

individualism that underpins so much of American life. Yet all is not well on the streets of America, and SAM's followers may be **forced** to realize their social responsibilities. As Clare points out, nowhere in "Carl Rogers on Personal Power" is there a "whiff of tear gas or an echo of Baader Meinhoff rhetoric". The pages are replete with serious long haired preoccupied young Americans, struggling to feel feelings... (11) This ideology of individualism has received a considerable boost in the counselling skills, self help and social skills training fields with Rotter's work on the "locus of control" (12). But as Sue points out the locus of control argument is underpinned by a WASP (White Anglo Saxon Protestant) ideology. Counsellors, who are invariably WASPish, run the risk of interpreting the "there's nothing I can do about it" pleas of those who are disadvantaged for **real** social-structural reasons (e.g. racial minorities, one parent families) as simply procrastination, laziness, depression, or lack of self-control.

### **Conclusion: The Gospel According to SAM**

Certainly a little meditation, self awareness, yoga, guided fantasy and communication skills and empathy will do little harm and some good but is that enough? I have suggested in this article that it is not so much the particular practices that constitute SAM that we must approach with caution, but rather the ideas, values, and claims that underpin them.

SAM's emphasis on **process** is invariably at the cost of **content**. SAM's focus on the **individual** is

frequently to the exclusion of **society**, and SAM's regard for the **intellect**. Whilst SAM's gurus often express alternative values, their interiorizing ensures that current values will remain largely untouched. Their approach to social change is simplistic in assuming that changing individuals' awareness changes the world. Such a leap is largely an act of faith. There clearly is a sense in which SAM can alert people to the nature of their oppression but in itself SAM is not enough. Moreover for reasons suggested here SAM can easily be counter-productive to social change. Despite the claim of SAM to be a means for personal **and** social transformation, there is little evidence to support it. Marilyn Ferguson's book 'The Aquarian Conspiracy', the new bible for many SAM disciples, may indeed be as the foreword says "drenched in sunlight", unfortunately it is totally devoid of empirical data to show how SAM is transforming society, particularly for those less privileged. (14) Nor should we be surprised, despite the books' gargantuan claims, that in its 450 pages there is barely a reference to the work of Karl Marx. Even to those of extreme right wing political persuasion this would seem to be a glaring omission. But perhaps to

even **ask** these sorts of questions is to be dismissed as being cynical, and divisive - to want to rationally assess SAM's meaning and value when what is asked for is that we simply **believe**. For the rationalist though this produces a peculiar double bind - on the one hand SAM not infrequently claims that only those who have 'experienced' can comment, and furthermore SAM disciples argue that the rationalist suffers from too much objectivity (too much left and not enough right brain activity!). Thus for SAM objectivity rather than providing solutions is itself the problem. There is more than a hint of evangelicalism about SAM, there is a sense in which what is required is for its followers to undergo a process akin to religious conversion.

There is no doubt that many of us over-value intellect but to cast all rationality aside may be dangerous indeed. Denial of feeling can indeed become for some a way of life, but so too can denial of fact. SAM can become a recipe for social complacency and counsellors especially should beware since they are well placed to preach the gospel according to SAM.

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## THE SELF-AWARENESS MOVEMENT —A REBUTTAL

by

John Rowan

Chris Scott's article (Counselling, May 1985) was so anxious and angry, with its talk of "potential dangers", "self-indulgence", "social irresponsibility", "assault upon reason", "political insensitivity", "counter-productive to social change", "evangelicalism" and so forth, that I wondered what sort of dreadful people it was warning about, and where I might have met one. And then I realized I had met one in the mirror this morning. The article was supposed to be about me.

It's true I have never used the words "Self-Awareness Movement", but when I have referred to the Human Potential Movement or the Growth Movement or to Humanistic Psychology I have been talking about many of the same things that Chris Scott mentions. It actually seems safer to me to talk about humanistic psychology, because this has a history and a location and an identity in a way that the other labels do not. After all, Roy Wallis (1985) says - "At the core of the

Growth Movement is the field of **humanistic psychology**". The advantage is that there are books and journals and newsletters and organizations actually representing this field in a quite explicit way, and we do not have to guess at its scope and limits.

When I started to question myself as to whether the accusations in the article were true or not, what struck me again and again was their datedness. Scott says that this country is ten years out of date - his own article certainly is. He has managed to criticise a movement without quoting any of its proponents' statements less than ten years old.

This ignorance about the recent work is compounded by the erection of a number of straw men and aunt sallies which are easily knocked down. Such an easy walk-over must have some strong motivation, and this motivation is not hard to find. Scott says at one point: