



Marathon Groups — Then and Now

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I participated in my first 48-hour marathon in 1971. It ran from midnight Friday to midnight Sunday and we had about five hours sleep in the two days, plus meal breaks. Apart from trips to the toilet we all stayed in the same room for the whole time. The idea was to create a pressured situation where people felt there was no alternative to dealing with the relationships in the room. It felt like the group would last forever and there was no chance of holding out; a great deal of group pressure was generated towards dropping one's 'image' and expressing feelings. I

was both terrified and exhilarated. I left there on the Sunday night and walked home through London feeling high. When I got home, the people I lived with asked me what had I learned about myself. I didn't know how to answer them. Looking back I think I learned something about how out of touch with myself I was, but I didn't know how to articulate it. I hadn't dropped my image that much!

What I was left with was the sense of excitement about 48-hour groups, and the sense of promise about how much contact was possible. In the early seven-

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ties, having done a considerable amount more group work as a participant, I went on to train in encounter groups, especially in marathons.

I was very excited by the spirit of exploration in those early groups, and by people's willingness to explore new emotional ground and push themselves to new limits. I have no doubt that there was a lot of very intense growth experience, emotional expression and contact in those groups for many people, which opened up the possibility of those things in other parts of their lives. However, as the seventies came to a close and we moved into the eighties, it became clear to me that I was no longer comfortable with that style of working. I thought it relied too much on group pressure and not enough on informed adult choice. There was too much emphasis on emotional expression and not enough on integration. There was too much reliance on the skills, personality and charisma of the leader, at the cost of the creativity of the group process. There was also too much hidden judgement about how people ought to be – for instance, people should be open, honest, emotionally expressive, able to deal with anger, always willing to be in contact, want to work on any issue that came up, and always be ready to take risks. This may be something of a caricature, but there was too much truth in it for me to feel comfortable with.

Those who want to register, regulate and restrict psychotherapy and growth work might be tempted to cite early encounter groups as the kind of work the public needs protection from. However, the criticisms I make here should be viewed with a sense of balance; in all but

a very few extreme cases the benefits of such groups far outweighed the disadvantages. I think it is extremely unlikely that the kind of creative group work we do today could ever have evolved if the kind of restrictive measures proposed now had been in force before, and they may well restrict future developments.

In 1978 I stopped leading marathons and took time to rethink. The question was how to work in a way that: (a) allowed people to explore here-and-now face-to-face interpersonal, emotional issues (which most other ways of working did not), (b) respected a person's rights to explore in his/her own way and pace, and (c) retained some of the exciting, risk-taking, pioneering spirit of the old groups.

In 1984 John Leary-Joyce (then a member of The Open Centre, and now director of The Gestalt Centre) and I decided to co-lead a 48-hour group combining our two main ways of working, encounter and gestalt. The group was an immediate, if qualified, success. We managed to combine in such a way as to create a new and exciting, if fairly awkward, blend. Co-leading groups is a quite intimate relationship that requires a lot of trust and sensitivity, and takes time to build. I had been used to working in a rather structured way, and John in a much more 'follow-the-flow', organic style. Initially this produced a little tension between us, but also an increasing respect for what the other had to offer. The result has been an exciting blend of structure and chaos — enough structure to contain the energy of a group within safe boundaries, and enough freedom for each group to find its own vital way of being and exploring. Over the nine years or so we

have been doing marathons, we have refined the structure and our way of working together, almost with each successive group.

We work from 7.30pm Friday to 7.30pm Sunday (rather than midnight to midnight, as in the early marathons). This allows us to take two sleep breaks without losing the shape of the group. We don't use exhaustion to overcome emotional defences, as was the case on the old-style marathons. (Then, people arrived having done a normal day's work on the Friday, to start the marathon at midnight and work without sleep for the first twenty-four hours; the theory was that people had less energy for resisting). The point of the marathon now is to make the most possible use of the hours in one weekend. In fact, the breaks (sleep, meal and tea) are an increasingly important part of the marathon. As the group develops, and the connectedness of the group deepens, people use the breaks for different kinds of contact. They can also use the time to put into practice things they learn in other parts of the marathon. The rest of the time is divided between structured group exercises, individual work, free-wheeling group work (where the focus of attention can switch very quickly round the group), and small group work (on most marathons we get people to form into units of four or five so they can keep touching base with a few familiar people.)

Each marathon has a beginning, middle and end. The first phase of the group is where we start to move from being a disparate collection of individuals to being a more connected community. Most people feel at least a bit anxious as they arrive, and the best way we have found to deal

with this is to have shared experiences, so as part of the first phase we do a series of group exercises. As people experience each other, and share their experiences in feedback, anxiety lessens and connectedness builds; the group starts to become a more cohesive unit where people will work for each other, as well as for themselves. The more people share, the deeper the contact becomes. As well as the important task of getting the group together, this phase is an opportunity for participants to learn something about their own particular ways of making connections with others.

The middle phase of the group is where much of the exploration takes place. We try to create a situation where people can explore any issue in an atmosphere of human respect. We encourage people to respond as honestly as they can. In my experience it is this honest, human response that is the real healing power of groups. Where someone's response is angry or judgmental we encourage them to express it in such a way that they own it rather than dump it, or project it, onto someone else; so, for example, we encourage 'when you do that I feel angry', rather than 'you're making me angry' or 'you shouldn't do that'. It is a simple change, but when feelings are owned and expressed, rather than projected, everyone is liberated. I believe people grow and learn best in an atmosphere that is free from judgement but, since we are all human and we do have judgements, the next best thing is to own them and share them as cleanly as possible. At least it also keeps us all from being 'holier than thou'.

Everyone makes free choices about what they do and don't do during the

group. There is no coercion. Old-style marathons used excessive group pressure sometimes to 'push' people into expression of feeling, or behaviour change. We would rather support people in their ability (and right) to make their own choices, with awareness. Participants set their own level of risk. All groups entail some risk. It is part of the growth process that people explore ground that is unknown to them, and the unknown entails an element of risk. However, what feels like a reasonable and exciting risk to take for one person may seem terrifying and reckless to another. For someone to refuse to take a risk can also be a significant growth step. Many of us grow up in families where we are discouraged from defining our own needs, and our own experience; ('Mummy and Daddy know best' or 'Don't be silly, there's nothing to be frightened of'). When someone says 'I don't want to do that' and their assertion is accepted, it is another experience of self-definition and affirmation of their ability to define themselves. In a marathon, where others are also taking risks in an atmosphere of acceptance, the feeling of safety and the level of risk-taking tends to increase as the group progresses.

We give a lot of attention to the ending of the marathon. It is important to give people ample time to say good-bye, and to

acknowledge and deal with any loose ends they may have. People also need a chance to look at what they have got from the group, what they have learned that they want to take away with them, and how they might use those things in their life outside of the group. This is vital in integrating the experience of the marathon.

The principal difference, in my experience, between the ways of working in marathons now and twenty years ago is the level of acceptance of people as they are. Too large a part of what motivated people in the old groups was fear — of being excluded, doubted, ridiculed or accused of 'copping out'. Now people are more motivated by the prospect of being accepted as they are, with the opportunity to explore those aspects they fear are not acceptable to themselves or others. After so many marathons, I'm still impressed and touched by the sheer depth of care and desire for real human contact that most people show given the right circumstances. The excitement of the group now is in the possibilities of increased contact, both with self and with others, and in the increased possibilities for self-expression, rather than the old-style excitement that went with a sense of danger, or of being swept along by the group. Ultimately, for me as a group leader, that is more satisfying.

