

Self Development within Experiential Groups - A Gestalt Perspective

Paul Barber

'Freedom consists not in refusing to recognise anything above us, but in respecting something which is above us; for by respecting it, we raise ourselves to it, and, by our very acknowledgement, prove that we bear within ourselves what is higher, and are worthy to be on a level with it'
(Goethe).

Humanism has guided my practice as a group facilitator for some thirty years. Being permissive, holistic and experimental, its counsel has informed me within disciplines as diverse as mental health, education, research and organisational consultancy. Humanism complemented my development as a psychodynamic facilitator within therapeutic communities, informs me as a gestaltist, and serves to cement these earlier influences to a perspective more recently informed by Taoism. This diversity of application is possible because Humanism speaks to what is core in the human condition, our unique potential to be both *mundane* and *divine*.

Humanism is also fun! It gives us permission to express our emotional energies while providing a framework to explore spiritual aspirations. Indeed, to humanists, life itself is sacred. Unlike our analytic colleagues

who of necessity remain opaque and in role to work covertly with transference, humanists and gestaltists are at liberty to enjoy a robust authentic relationship with their clients.

*'What you do in life is vaguely interesting;
Who you are is inspiring'*

(Rita Hogarth).

Humanism and Gestalt - Some Common Principles

'As awareness increases, the need for personal secrecy almost proportionately decreases'

(Charlotte Painter)

In this article I will first review some principles core to Humanism and Gestalt, namely *holism*, *autonomy*, *experiential inquiry* and *democracy*, and in the remainder will demonstrate

how these shape my facilitative vision and group facilitation. So here goes:

Holism suggests that a person's mental, physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual qualities are integral to 'everything they do' and 'all they are'. Consequently, an individual is approached as a whole mind-body-spiritual being. Gestalt builds on this notion by approaching the person as a constellation of ever changing dynamic forces - a field. Because every thing is seen to be multi-faceted and multi-influenced, we are cautioned akin to humanists, that there are no easy answers or simple solutions to human problems.

**As a facilitator, holism encourages me to approach groups as organic multi-dimensional entities, which, though composed of conscious and unconscious elements of the individuals within them, nevertheless express a life of their own. Attending to the whole I endeavour to foster a dialogue between 'the group' and the 'individuals within', which illuminates the inter-play of our physical, social, emotional, imaginal and spiritual natures.*

Autonomy suggests that given the opportunity and resources, individuals are best placed to diagnose and resolve their own problems. This humanistic principle supports the Gestalt notion that the client is the expert, as they know far more about themselves than I or anyone else will ever do. As a facilitator alert to autonomy I watch and listen very carefully to what the group and the individuals within present. Guided by the group's own wisdom and energetic currents I follow what emerges, sharing my observations while inquiring into its dynamics. In this way, in my attempt to act as a flexible resource who guides the group towards a culture

of autonomy and self-empowerment, I am primarily client-directed in style.

Experiential inquiry, in service of personal development, suggests it is important to meet life in an open and inquiring way, to attend to the unique nature of our present relationships and to experiment with becoming the whole of ourselves. As with Gestalt, Humanism stresses experimentation rather than intellectualisation.

**As a facilitator I encourage people to take nothing for granted, but rather to question and to explore everything. Through a focus upon perceptions, beliefs and relationships, I seek to illuminate through collaborative group inquiry insight born from direct experience.*

Democracy supports the notion that we are interdependent rather than independent, and suggests that reason and negotiation should inform all we do. As we are social beings who share much in common, to further the common good democratic process must underpin all decision-making and debate. In Gestalt and Humanism alike, sharing and transparency rather than authoritative imposition inform group and community norms.

**As a facilitator I work to negotiate a client-centred menu where everyone may be involved in forming the 'how' and the 'what' of the group experience on offer. Democracy also keeps me alert to the need for healthy 'I-Thou' relationships, and causes me to be watchful of communication that slides towards an ego-centric 'I-I' or a reductionist 'I-It' stance to life, the self or others.*

Though we rarely tease out the above principles so distinctly, they remain at the heart of every humanistic thought

and Gestalt action. In the remainder of this article we will examine how holism, autonomy, experiential inquiry and democracy may be fostered to effect a culture conducive to whole person development, a climate where:

'No construction, however broadly based, will have an absolute authority; the indomitable freedom of life to be more, to be new, to be what it has not entered into the heart of man as yet to conceive, must always remain standing. With that freedom goes the modesty of reason that can lay claim only to partial knowledge, and to the ordering of a particular soul, or city, or civilisation'

(Santayana quoted in Blackham 1968 p 11).

Co-Creating a Community - Autonomy and Democracy in Action

'If we can find a way to let go of the ego needs, roles, symbols and righteous behaviour, then we can enter the chaos of new learning and begin to discover once again new parts of ourselves.'

(O'Neill 1991)

In embryonic groups, in an attempt to move individuals from a concern with their little-self and *'what they can get'* towards a stance of *'what they might begin to give'*, I have found it helpful to discuss the usefulness – and limitation - of the following guidelines:

- Work to flatten any authority pyramid of the group and to open up for further examination any authoritative and hierarchical responses when these occur.
- Risk sharing thoughts, feelings, sensory awareness and fantasies with others, so as to raise awareness to the hidden agenda of social interaction.

- Engage in on-going analysis of the social events that unfold, and be prepared to explore the effect of these on yourself and others.
- Risk experimenting with the philosophy that problems are mostly in relation to others and capable of resolution through face-to-face discussion.
- Persevere to constantly put to examination roles and behaviours, with a view to increasing understanding and current awareness of the group or community's progress to date.
- Listen to the whole of yourself and endeavour to do the same with others.
- Open yourself to communication and respect any messages of helplessness or confusion that arise.
- Accept emotions as energies rather than problems or symptoms to be resolved.
- Experiment with owning and exploring different ways of behaving and being.
- Engage with the here and with the now.

The first five are derived from the living and learning approach encouraged by therapeutic communities (Main 1980), the second five from workshops I have conducted within the Human Potential Research Group at the University of Surrey. Approaching these guidelines as suggestions and *'starting point'* rather than as an *'answer'*, has over the years refined the following more practical ground-rules for immediate group consumption:

1) Own:

Speak from the authority of your own experience, ie: *'I think...'*; *'I feel...'*; *'I see or hear...'*; *'I imagine...'*; rather than indirectly through the use of such phrases as *'one thinks...'*; *'people tend to...'*; or by labelling others through such as *'you are...'*.

2) **Explore:**

Engage in ongoing exploration and analysis of the social and interpersonal events that unfold and remain curious to the effects of these upon the behaviour of yourself and others.

3) **Experiment:**

Risk opening yourself to others and reducing your guard; honour your own stuck-ness and confusion and experiment with being tolerant of this in others; be prepared to explore new ways of expressing and being you.

4) **Respect:**

Do not take beyond the group - nor share within it without the prior consent of those concerned - material of a confidential nature; take responsibility for sharing or holding onto your own secrets.

5) **Act:**

Choose for yourself when to call a halt or to opt out of activities which appear wrong for you at the time; do not collude in situations that you feel are personally unhealthy.

Introducing the above I have found does much to shift a resistive group to a research-minded one. Indeed, this process provides an opportunity for participants to test me out, to assess my facilitative bias, to socially engage and find out about others, and to actively explore the contributes they might make. In short, when successful, it encourages group ownership and begins to create a cultural container for future development.

'Men bound in fellowship weep then laugh.

First they struggle, then comes meeting'

(I Ching)

Working Phenomenologically - Illuminating rather than Interpreting

'The most significant understandings that I have come to I have not achieved from books or others, but initially, at least, from my own direct perceptions, observations, and intuitions...from transcendental places of imagination and reflection' (Moustakas 1994).

Humanists, similar to Gestaltists, subscribe to the belief that our '*being*', that inner light of consciousness through which we illuminate meaning, is our primary reality, and that all else is derivative. In this light, individuals do not so much work out their position in the world by recourse to elaborate models and theoretical scales, but rather define who they are through their '*lived experience*'. Because an individual knows what words best describe, what memories best fit and what meanings best apply to the events they experience, I believe it is more honouring of the human condition to work phenomenologically than interpretatively. So what does this imply?

In a '*phenomenological*' or Gestalt approach, a group facilitator works primarily with what they can see, hear and feel, rather than through the imposition of interpretations. Here conceptualisation comes second to building a phenomenological picture of '*awareness*' which is refined through '*immediate experience*' and a '*felt sense*' of things. '*Processes*' rather than '*conclusions*' are hereby highlighted, questions take precedence over answers, and self and group awareness are raised by exploring and describing the immediate experience of the person embedded in his or her environment (Yontif 1996). This approach, akin to

humanism, operates on the premise that:

- *knowledge is best defined through experiential inquiry;*
- *consciousness is active and bestows a meaning on what is perceived;*
- *mindful reflection allows us to gain knowledge of the essential nature of consciousness.*

As a Gestalt informed humanist another principle shades in to support me, the cultivation of mindfulness through an attention upon the unfolding moment.

As consciousness is focused in the present, and as a pre-occupation with the past or future dissipates our presence and power to act, it follows that we must be fully in the moment if we are to empower ourselves and awaken the spirit. In experiential groups informed by humanism and Gestalt we are therefore invited to inquire into everything that defines our existence in the 'here' and the 'now'. The information and resource we need is suggested to be available in the moment. All we have to do is to illuminate it.

Knowledge absorbed from books does not so much generate awareness, as more information. The knowledge that comes through an experiential group working in a phenomenological way is born from 'being in' rather than 'thinking about' the world.

'To become aware of what is happening, I must pay attention with an open mind. I must set aside my personal prejudices or bias. Prejudiced people only see what fits these prejudices'

(I Ching)

Towards Self-Actualisation - Repairing and Moving Beyond the Past

'A musician must make his music, an artist must paint; a poet must write if he is to ultimately be at peace with himself'

(Maslow 1967)

Allowing yourself to be fully yourself and un-hindered by unnecessary socially instilled shoulds and conventions, coming home to your real and potentiated self, you are 'actualised'.

Groups permeate our lives. We are raised in the family group, socialised within a community group and moulded by peer and professional groups. As we were formed by groups, in group settings we meet again with conditions similar to those that first influenced us. If your birth was difficult - your entry to the group may also be difficult; if your family was troublesome - the group may be troublesome; if you fell out with your parents - you are likely to fall out with the group facilitator. But, having placed ourselves in a situation where our earlier scripts become re-fired, we now have an opportunity to re-experience and re-write our behavioural blue-prints, and so re-create ourselves anew.

Abraham Maslow (1967) through his study of those who maintained peak human performance throughout their life, surfaces qualities an experiential group needs to foster to enable self-actualisation, namely, an ability to:

- *perceive reality efficiently;*
- *tolerate uncertainty;*
- *accept themselves and others for what they are;*
- *be spontaneous in thought and behaviour;*

- *maintain a good sense of humour;*
- *be problem-centred rather than self-centred;*
- *be highly creative;*
- *be resistive to enculturation but not purposely unconventional;*
- *demonstrate concern for the welfare of mankind;*
- *be deeply appreciative of the basic experiences of life;*
- *establish deep satisfying relationships with a few - rather than court many people;*
- *look at life philosophically and objectively.*

Self-actualisers are involved with life, stay curious and experimental, retain a child-like freshness and fully engage with the world. But before we ourselves can move in this direction we must develop certain basic skills. For example, we need to have experienced a relationship where skills of 'inhibition and taking turns', 'conceptualisation of the other person' and 'empathy' have been fostered before we can progress to self-actualisation.

Because the family is the main relational playground where we learn what it is to be human, and as groups educate us in a similar way to the family, we will examine the above qualities in a little more detail:

Reciprocity implies that relationship is like a dance where we must learn our part and the choreography involved:

'When two people integrate their behaviour they must take turns, and taking turns involves inhibition. In conversation, for example, people speak successively, not simultaneously, so each inhibits her or his own speech while the other person is speaking'

(Maccoby 1980).

People who do not anchor this principle of reciprocity, believing that love and relationship are finite feel driven to compete for air-time and attention. Giving too much of themselves in an effort to bond with others, they can end up pushing them away, for they have not learnt in Maslovian terms to:

- *be problem-centred rather than self centred;*
- *be spontaneous in thought and behaviour;*
- *look at life philosophically and objectively;*
- *tolerate uncertainty.*

Accurate Person Perception, a process where we learn to conceptualise other people, is initially developed with our mothers, practised in the family, and later generalised to the community:

'When children are very young they have little understanding of what other people know, what they intend, what they want. For a mature attachment relationship, each person must construct a schema of the other person'

(Maccoby 1980).

Again, not all people learn this lesson well, some arrive in adulthood without a clear picture of others. Appreciating only their own needs they are heavily invested within their own dramas and have little psychic space for the contributions of others. At root, feeling isolated, out of touch and untrusting, they may project these self-same qualities outwards on the world, for they have not yet learnt to:

- *accept themselves and others for what they are;*
- *be resistive to enculturation but not purposely unconventional;*
- *be creative;*
- *perceive reality efficiently.*

Empathy. Learn to take turns, to inhibit your impulses and to accurately perceive others and you have the potential to relate, but without 'empathy' although you appear to be doing the right things - but you will only be going through the motions - mechanically. Humourless, sometimes hidden behind a veneer of superiority, afraid of getting things wrong and making mistakes such individuals can feel desperately alone, for they have not yet learnt to:

- be deeply appreciative of the basic experiences of life;
- establish deep satisfying relationships;
- have a good sense of humour;
- demonstrate concern for the welfare of mankind.

What we fail to learn in the family we are condemned to struggle with elsewhere, but this need not be a disadvantage, for what we learn later in life - within a developmental setting - may be 'mindfully' rather than subconsciously acquired.

Having journeyed some way towards identifying and working through their personal agenda, group participants may now begin to realise that they do not have to 'do' anything in an experiential group - but rather 'become'.

'What our conscious mind believes in - lies dormant in our unconscious.

How can we learn self-control, let alone realise our potential?

Unless we practise releasing control?

In keeping control we hold on to our routines, our fears and our ignorance.

By going with and listening to our intuition we surface our wisdom'

(Barber & Bates 2001).

Exploring Relationships - Becoming an Authentic and Autonomous Self

'The most awkward means are adequate to the communication of authentic experience, and the finest words no compensation for lack of it. It is for this reason that we are moved by the true Primitives and that the most accomplished art craftsmanship leaves us cold'

(Coomaraswamy).

There are three aspects of relationship that I find useful to monitor and to explore within experiential groups, namely, contractual, idealised and authentic levels (Greenson 1967) of social engagement. These are expanded upon a little more below:

The Contractual Level of Relationship

(Constructed from Sensory and Socio-Cultural information)

This level houses the stated purpose for a group relationship, its task and the working alliance that members forge. It includes the social and intellectual agreement that underpins the facilitative relationship; the scope, values, boundaries and rules of engagement (sexual boundaries etc); the criteria we negotiate to gauge success.

The Idealised Level of Relationship

(Constructed from Emotional and Imagined material)

This level houses the shadow-side of the contractual relationship, an area of engagement where emotional issues are unconsciously enacted. Here an experiential group may conjure up child-parent or subordinate-boss relationships, sexual game-play

and power-politics, which are fuelled by an imaginative rather than a physical and sensate orientation to the world.

The Authentic Level of Relationship

(Constructed from Intuitive-Spiritual sense of values and self)

This level says more about who you are at core - the real you from the driver's seat stripped of all social denial, defence and artifice. In this area group members act in accord with their ethical and spiritual values. This sense of a real relationship is based on accurate perceptions and a willingness to be open, honest and vulnerable.

This last level is of especial importance in a humanistic group. Authenticity, is akin to the soul coming home. Though 'care' resides at this level, there is also a certain uncompromising and ruthless quality about authenticity, for instance:

IT DOESN'T INTEREST ME

It doesn't interest me what you do for a living,

I want to know what you ache for and if you dare dream of meeting your heart's longing.

It doesn't interest me how old you are, I want to know if you will risk looking like a fool for love, for your dreams, for the adventure of being alive.

It doesn't interest me what planets are squaring your moon,

I want to know if you have touched the centre of your own sorrow, if you have been opened by life's betrayals or have become shrivelled and closed from fear of further pain.

I want to know if you can sit with pain, mine or your own, without moving to hide, or fade it or fix it.

I want to know if you can be with joy, mine or your own; if you can dance with wildness and let ecstasy fill you to the tips of your fingers and toes without cautioning us to be careful, be realistic or to remember the limitations of being human.

It doesn't interest me if the story you are telling me is true,

I want to know if you can disappoint another to be true to yourself, if you can bear the accusation of betrayal and not betray your soul.

I want to know if you can be faithful and therefore trustworthy.

I want to know if you can see beauty even when it's not pretty everyday and if you can source your life from its presence.

I want to know if you can live with failure, mine or your own, and still stand on the edge of the lake and shout to the silver of the moon 'YES'.

It doesn't interest me to know where you live or how much money you have,

I want to know if you can get up after the night of grief and despair, weary and bruised to the bone, and do what needs to be done for the children.

It doesn't interest me who you are or how you came to be here,

I want to know if you can stand in the centre of the fire with me and not shrink back.

It doesn't interest me where or what, or with whom you have studied,

I want to know what sustains you from the inside when all else falls away.

I want to know if you can be alone with yourself and if you truly like the company you keep in the empty moments.

(Oriah Mountain Dreamer - Native American Elder)

Having raised attention to 'who we are', 'what we need' and 'how we might proceed' within a group, individuals can may now start to glimpse the wider territory that the contractual, idealised and authentic levels of

relationship emanate from, the fertile void from whence everything originates.

'All things in the Universe come from existence, And existence from non-existence'

(Tao Te Ching)

Exploring Holistically - Engaging Holistically

'Community is not something created by adherence to rules. Whenever a group turns to defining what it means to be a 'community', it is a sure sign they have lost it'

(Barber & Bates 2001).

Though life is a flowing seamless whole, because it is impossible to see and attend to everything, simultaneously, some rudimentary mapping is often necessary. To enable a more holistic appreciation of life and living I find it useful to invite group participants to distinguish between physical, social, emotional, imaginal and transpersonal ways of knowing, for example:

Physical-Sensory Knowing - At the physical level of energy and matter we meet with sensory intelligence, our ability to contact and experience, our physical and physiological reality. Here we integrate ourselves as a sensory being in a physical world, are subject to our instincts, and learn to distinguish and give voice to our needs, wants and impulses.

Social-Cultural Knowing - At the cultural level we find social intelligence, our ability to relate to the world as we were earlier schooled to intellectually construct it. Here we negotiate relationships, learn to communicate and to function within expected norms, and hopefully, see beyond the cultural limitations that imposed upon us.

Emotional-Transferential Knowing - At the level of feeling rests emotional intelligence, our ability to contact and to express our feelings, to be empathetic, and to recognise the effect of emotionalised memories and learning from the past. Here we begin to appreciate how our emotional patterns and dramas impinge on the present.

Imaginal-Projective Knowing - At the level of creative fantasy exists imaginal intelligence, our ability to distinguish imagination and projection, and to understand the influence these have upon perception. Imaginative intelligence shows itself in creativity, recognition of the internal meanings and in the illumination of what we hold in shadow.

Transpersonal-Intuitive Knowing - At the level of the soul it may be suggested that there exists spiritual intelligence, an ability to perceive the transpersonal and be intuitively guided. At this level we adapt to the unknown and unknowable, and consider our greater purpose in life.

Within an experiential group individuals may be invited at the *physical-sensory level* to attend to physical evidence and to develop sensitivity to their physiological needs and supports. At the *social-cultural level* they may be invited to reflect upon how traditions and conventional thinking inform the roles they play. At the *emotional-transferential level* they are encouraged to examine their emotional patterns and family scripts, and to sever connection with an ever presenting past. At the *projective-imaginative level* they may be encouraged to identify their sub-personalities and to unpack the imaginative constructs they project upon the world. At the *transpersonal-*

intuitive level they may be invited to value themselves and the human condition, and through reflection upon 'what their soul has come to learn' to draw nearer to their authentic core and their life's true purpose.

In reality, the above are false divisions which miss the majesty of the whole. As each experiential level flows into the others, there are no clear distinctions, merely points of concentration. This model is therefore merely a vehicle through which to explore the paradoxical nature of existence.

'If we can find a way to let go of the ego needs, roles, symbols and righteous behaviour, then we can enter the chaos of new learning and begin to discover once again new parts of ourselves'

(O'Neill 1991).

EXPERIENTIAL LEVELS OF REALITY

(Some Questions to Consider)

PHYSICAL/SENSORY - Reality as evidenced by our senses & physiology (Observing how we support ourselves & explore the physical environment)

- .. How well do we utilise support from our surroundings & our breathing?
- .. How attentive to or anchored within & noticing of the physical world are we?
- .. How co-ordinated or integrated are we in our movements & to our bodily parts?
- .. Where in our bodies are we most fully alive & what parts feel dead?

SOCIAL/CULTURAL - Reality as taught & socially constructed (Noticing how engaged or attached to the 'world as taught' we are)

- .. To what extent do our relationships conform to the norm? (socio-professional norms)
- .. Who & what do we refer to for our belief/value orientation? (social references)
- .. How do we relate to others & the wider community? (our cultural location)

- .. What rules of engagement are we striving to establish? (power/politics/'isms'/rules)

EMOTIONAL/TRANSFERENTIAL -

Reality as transferentially/emotionally created

(Exploring how emotions past & present influence the current relationship)

- .. What emotional dramas or politics of the past impinge upon the present?
- .. How are family & parent-child dynamics enacted here? (transferential dynamics)
- .. What sort of relational dance am I being invited to join? (counter-transference)
- .. Who do we represent & what memories inform us & influence our behaviour here?

PROJECTIVE/IMAGINAL -

Reality as imaginatively created & projected by the self

(Unpacking & integrating the shadow - all we mirror & stimulate of each other)

- .. Which part of us is engaged in this meeting? (image/intellect/role/archetype/heart)
- .. How empathetic or rejecting of the other or of ourselves are we? (a self meeting self)
- .. What interests us - & what are we taking for granted? (values/meanings)
- .. What parts of ourselves are we holding back right now? (the shadow relationship)

TRANSPERSONAL/INTUITIVE -

Reality as intuitively guided/being & becoming)

(Staying alert to the wider picture & meaning of what is unfolding)

- .. What is in the process of becoming? (connection to the fertile void & potentiality)
- .. What intuition informs the undertone of this relationship? (the I-Thou meeting)
- .. What greater purpose may be served here? (what has the soul come here to learn?)

Paul Barber (2001)

A Personal Reflection

'I fall far short of achieving real communication - person-to-person - *all the time, but moving in this direction makes life for me a warm, exciting, upsetting, troubling, satisfying, enriching, and above all a worthwhile venture'*

(Rogers 1967).

So, at the last, putting all the fancy theory aside, *'What do I really do?'* Simply, striving to share my own store of authenticity, inquiring into myself while attuned to others, aware of what is unique while mindful of the whole, hopeful that by attuning to the present that what I convey will have relevance to what we experience this moment, I endeavour to stay curious, thin-skinned, respectful of the human condition and to do no harm.

'Inner truth comes of inner stability: But secret designs, of inner disquiet'

(I Ching)

Further Reading:

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