

Jerome Liss

“The space of the possible:” Summer camping and Group Experiences in a new Political tradition.

The summer of 1978 was the second year in which almost 1,000 people spent two or three weeks of their summer holiday in a most unique experience. Imagine a terrain of 10 acres, mixed woods, hills, valleys, clearings, with 100 tents dotting this landscape. Then you see small groups of people doing massage, hand-touching encounter, mirroring one another in creative gestures of "theatre games," tapping out rhythms and plunking guitars in improvisational music while some are dancing. And then we hear screams from one corner: it's the "primal group" doing their "discharge and rebirth" event. And then a group of children playing in the large central plain who suddenly see the old noisy truck rumbling down the rocky road: "It's the rubbish!" And they leap into it, more interested in making a clamour than picking up the wastebins, but the job does get done. At the same moment the kitchen team of eight or ten people (it's a different group each day) is cutting up vegetables and preparing a fruit salad for the collective evening meal when the majority of 220 camp participants including 50 children, will eat together in the open air.

Only in the paintings of Breugel does one find similar groupings of people strewn about the countryside in common tasks and co-operative efforts, all conducted in the spirit of warm sharing, equality and co-operating.

Origins

How has all this come about? Three years ago the Donnars family decided to make available their country land, which is located 50 miles from Bordeaux in southwest France (and only a 3-minute walk to the Gironde, which empties into the Atlantic Ocean), to their 26 year-old son, Yves Donnars and his friends in the "human potential movement". They lead groups of bioenergy, gestalt, encounter, psychodrama, and so on, and they are imbued with the philosophy and practice of "self-regulation", known as "autogestion" in France. The small group of friends decided to make this terrain available to people who wanted to create "spontaneous groups" of all sorts - therapeutic, educational, creative, playful, etc., while living in tents in this beautiful, natural setting, and while sharing the basic tasks of food, hygiene, safety, acceptance of new people, care of children, building and reparation of the camp facilities, employment of workshop materials, and so on. Such a vast and radical project can only *originate* from people with enormous amounts of idealism, courage conviction. Yves and his friends (Jacqueline Barbin and Carol Burcau, with Jaques Salzer and Michael Lobrot as advisors) have these qualities.

An Association called "The Space of the Possible" was formed to publicize the project and find members to participate in its realisation. A large part of the participants of course came from the "group movement" in France. Having already participated in therapy and creativity groups, most members were interested in extending the methods into a more "natural situation" where *anyone* can initiate a group and where all group members can contribute to its planning. In actual practice, experienced leaders often decide to lead groups (naturally, no one is ever paid to do this, which immediately changes an essential part of the leader-participant power-relationship). But less than 40 per cent of the groups are led by people with past experience in this field, and the tendency is for more and more "amateurs and inexperienced people" to propose the group events.

This type of project is almost unique and without precedent: the only other examples of "spontaneous group formation" were the International Summer Schools from 1970 to 1974 organised by Eve Godfrey (founder of Organisation Research Development in England), and Reception and Community organised by Alan and Isabelle Crespelle, which were inspired (like the Space of the Possible) by Eve Godfrey's original project. In the International Summer School, most groups were led by professional leaders. The movement toward spontaneous groups had started, but was only in its budding stage. The Summer Communities organised by the Crespelles have a fair proportion of spontaneous groups, and their "spirit" is quite to that of The Space of the Possible. The Crespelle communities are smaller (about 60 people are present at any one moment, while at the Space there are usually 200 present), and people live together in a large country house rather than tents.

How Does The Space of The Possible Work?

When the new arrival enters the Space, he is greeted by the sign, "Welcome: Come and See Us at the Reception." The Reception was a tent the first year and a small caravan the second year. It is located in the Plain, which is the favorite play area for the children, and from this central location one can see the kitchen and the bath-house where the Collective Showers are a favorite "lieu de rencontre" (meeting place) sunny mornings and hot afternoons.

The newcomer meets one of several "ancients" (an "ancient" is a person who has been at The Space for more than a week) who has signed up to be in the reception group. Each volunteer works for two-hours on a weekend day in order to help the new arrival find a good camping site and to give general information on how the Space works.

At 5 o'clock Sunday afternoon there is sometimes a "Group for Newcomers" for the new arrivals to meet one another and discuss how the Space functions with its "spontaneous groups," "collective tasks," and so on. Like all of the groups at the Space, this "Group for Newcomers" only *sometimes* happening, depending upon the motivation of one or several "ancients" to publicize it on the bulletin board and then to be present at the meet-place. If there had been enough complaints by newcomers the previous week at one of the

General Meetings that they were not sufficiently helped in their initial period, there would usually be a "Group for Newcomers" the following week.

Of course, if someone were *paid* each week to organise this group, it would take place without fail. It is interesting to note that events at the Space often occur in the order: Action-Criticism-New Action. This is one of the important features of decentralisation: An action can be criticized and modified by the people who receive its impact so that a more desirable action is planned the second time around. This sequence of events, which allows for an unending improvement, might be seen as part of a continuous revolution or, at least, a ceaseless dynamic in human events. At the Space, the problem is not the limitation of change and expression by the authority, since "the authority" is almost without substance. Rather, the problem is the lack of initiative by the camp participants to make known their wishes and then take the steps necessary to realize their goals. But in this "to-and-fro" between lack of satisfaction and then realisation by personal action, each person learns to take his part and responsibility in a large social network.

This is an education which people have usually not received in their professional or wage-earning lives, and, unfortunately, not even in their school education.

Thus the Space is a place for a living-learning experience on the level of group organisation and tasks, as well as in the domains of personal development and emotional education.

Sunday evening at 7 o'clock there is a General Meeting. At least 70 per cent of the camp participants attend. and sign-up sheets for the main collective tasks of the week are sent around. There is no scrutiny or supervision insofar as who signs for what; it is left to people's awareness and motivation. Some sign up for two or three tasks, and others none. What is required? Each day eight or ten are needed to plan and prepare the evening meal, three are needed to clean the toilets and showers, three are needed to collect and carry away the dustbins, and two or three are needed to provide activities for the children. Each person learns in an informal, non-structured way how to do each of these tasks.

The problems of a decentralised system are rather interesting. At one General Meeting, the "ancients" went into great detail explaining how to perform the collective tasks and even how to improve their functioning .

For example, a member of the kitchen group from the previous week emphasized that it was important to plan each meal before 4 o'clock the afternoon of the previous day; because at that time the fruit and vegetable man would come to the kitchen; and if one placed an order for the *following* day, he could make his order to the wholesalers that afternoon, and the result would be a better quality product at a lower price.

During this period of "suggestions and discussions," the sign-up sheets were passed around and all were quickly filled. But a number of people left the

'meeting early and others criticized the content with a feeling of irritability, claiming that in all this discussion about "kitchen, cleaning and rubbish," the human element of what is important at the Space was left out.

Based on this criticism, the General Meeting of the following week was planned to maximize "an encounter" among the participants. A warm up of body exercises and then body contact was followed by the breakdown into small groups for discussion. Each group was asked to offer a summary of their discussion to the whole group at the end of the meeting. At the same time the sign-up sheets for the group tasks was passed around. But because there was very little discussion about the nature and the importance of these tasks, they were less than half-completed by the end of the meeting.

The problem was not very serious because the sheets were left on the bulletin board and there were usually a sufficient number of people to sign-up for each task of the following day.

The point is to see how differing groups needs *can* be expressed in a decentralised system, and that the capacity to negotiate conflicts and find new creative solutions is constantly demanded. At the same time, we can appreciate that the people in this situation had the capacity to *make known* their demands for a meeting with more personal encounter in small groups, which is a manner of meeting that gives greater satisfaction *and* opportunity for personal expression than a large group meeting based solely on practical tasks. (1) It would seem that "political groups" might learn from this experience and realize how frustrating their meetings must be, especially for the quieter people are do not take the central stage to express their opinions and who are deprived (or deprive themselves) of this emotional satisfaction. If a *part* of the time were devoted to personal encounter, and another part of the time to the group tasks, (1) the political group (women's liberation, ecology, tenants' union, etc.) would have more success in attracting new members and, a more difficult job, in *keeping* them.



After the General Meeting, the collective evening meal is served. The price is 9 francs for a complete meal and for the following morning's breakfast. Because the kitchen team of each day is different and plans the meal that it will prepare, there is a wide variety of food offered each week. The low cost of each meal, its generally high quality, and the time saved for each camp member who does not have to prepare his individual meal, provide an excellent example of how well-planned collective action following a decentralised model (the kitchen group does not follow the orders of a professionally-hired chief cook, but creates its own recipes) can give an extremely satisfying result.

To understand how this works, it is important to remember that a certain amount of "centralised information" is passed on from one group to the other: The earliest kitchen groups, for example, put up signs on the kitchen walls giving the locations and telephone numbers of food retail stores and wholesalers, indicating what percentage discount one can expect because the group buys in bulk quantities. We see here how social awareness can replace a central authority, because there was no authority to *ask* the kitchen groups to put up information for the following groups. These details show how collective living, to succeed, demands spontaneous actions that come from people's new social awareness. A project such as The Space for the Possible gives an opportunity for such awareness by concrete practice. And people can "remind" one another of the incompleting tasks and new problems which need to be confronted at the regularly scheduled General Meetings and at spontaneous meetings which can be initiated by anyone at all.

One problem was the long queue of people waiting to be served the evening meal. Aperitifs were often served to the people in line and the period of waiting could often be used as a moment of conversation. Nevertheless a suggested solution to eliminate the queue was that the association buy additional casseroles and serving plates so that the food could be distributed among the tables for groups of ten.

The Start of the Day at The Space

Some people start their day at the space by springing out of bed and rushing to the 9 a.m. (Bhagwan) Dynamic Meditation group where they can jump up and down crying, "Who!", filling their lungs with rich oxygen, and then moving about with wild gesticulations in the "Expel Your Madness" part of the meditation. Or others raise their arms more slowly as a greeting to the morning sun in a Natural Movement group. Some wash their linen, others wash themselves in the collective shower (another important "lieu de rencontre"), and the majority drag themselves sleepy-eyed to the morning coffee or tea, learning how to fight their way past the wasps to dig out some strawberry jam from the large restaurant-sized tin.

Once awake, the first thing nearly every person does is to wend his/her way toward the central bulletin board to see, "What's happening today." This remarkable and yet simple method of a large chart pinned up on a bulletin

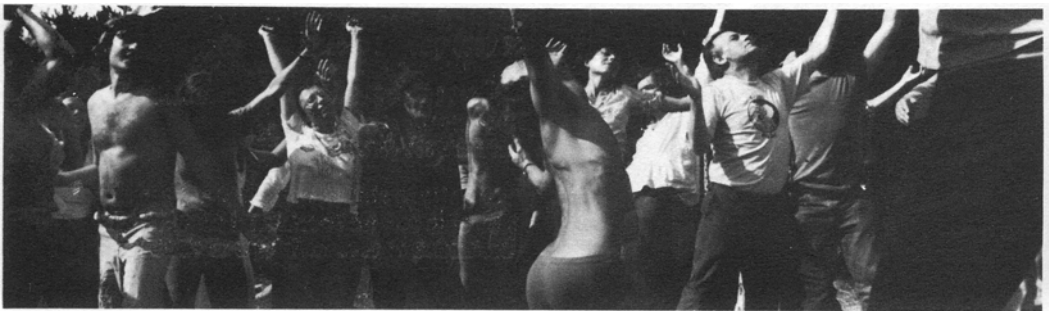
board serves as the basic means of communication among those who want to initiate spontaneous groups and for the many who want to voluntarily participate in these groups. The structure of the chart is very simple:

EXAMPLE:

| Time | Proposition | Where? | Who? |
|-------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| 9.00 | Natural gymnastic | Mont Venus | José |
| 10.00 | Carpentry | Prairie | Marie |
| 11.00 | Bioenergy and Gentleness Consciousness group, men and women | Mont Venus Prairie | Ives Helene Georges |
| 1.00 | Organisational Meeting For Everyone | Kitchen | Bertrand |
| 2.00 | Massage using Acupuncture points | Womb | David |
| | Group leaving for the beach | Caravan | Lisa, Tom |
| 4.00 | Videoscope study of body communication | Mountain | Jacques |
| | Voice games and exercises | Prairie | Jean |
| 6.00 | Volleyball | Prairie | Adolescents |
| | Dynamic meditation | Womb | Amanda |
| 9.00 | Folk dancing from Brittany | Prairie | Marie |

The first time I had seen such a chart was at Eve Godfrey's International Summer School at Arundel in the summer of 1974. At that time I had the role, "Consultant for Spontaneous Groups." I met with a group of people to discuss how we could encourage the formation of *spontaneous* groups when a number of known group leaders were also present at the school offering pre-planned groups. The above chart was one result of our discussions, along with signs put upon the walls saying, "Take a Chance and Propose Your Own Group," "Self-regulation is the Best Regulation," "Everybody Participates and Everybody Gains," etc.

Undoubtedly this sort of Sign-Up Sheet for Spontaneous Groups has been used before and in other settings. In my opinion it offers a simple and elegant structure for "centralised communication" and solves the very important problem of how to co-ordinate individual decision-making (the proposal of a spontaneous group) in a decentralised setting.



One immense success of the Space is the enormous *range* of groups offered, and usually, as stated before, by non-professional people: here are some of them.

Group of Consciousness
(for men)
Group of Consciousness
(for women)
Celebration with Painting
the body
Theatre games
Painting on silk
Photography
Meditation dynamic
Volley ball
Workshop on the creation of sound
Mime
Bioenergy, exploring violence
Bioenergy, exploring tenderness
Primal scream
Co-counselling
Psychodrama
Dynamic Relaxation
Discussion on Sophrology
Discussion on Life in a Community
Group for improvisational music
Songs from Brittany
Relational massage
Massage and Sensitisation
Californian massage
Reichian massage
Energy redistribution massage
Pottery
Wood-working
Sculpture in wood
Sculpture in stone
Sculpture in clay
Free design in crayons and oil
Creating with leather
Making your own clothes
Facial expression explored with video
Filming the Space with video
Children's film creation with video

Evening Celebrations

Cabaret
Sketches
Brazilian Night
Rock-and Roll night offered
by the Adolescents
Instrumental music and singing
and dancing

Discussions and Encounter

What happens in sexual relations
at the Space?
Why do couples often have
crises at the Space?
How do single-people adjust
to the Space?
Is the Space a place for therapy?

An abundance of oil on the
body and the creation of games

The groups of "consciousness," sometimes for "men only," sometimes for "women only," and often for "men and women together," have a special importance at the Space. Whether people come in couples or without a partner, there is much opportunity and stimulation for "the new encounter." And

coming from a society where the taboos, misunderstandings, and repressions in all intimate adult contact run rampant, these "consciousness groups" offer people a place for "listening and sharing," hopefully with a feeling of safety coming from the group's non-judgmental and attentive listening. To find that each person's fears and confusions find resonance in other people's disclosures is both comforting and kind of emotional education. Furthermore, the "social basis" of each one's psychological problems supports this "self-regulating group" approach as one step toward the solution.

In glancing at this long list of groups, it is clear that many are for "personal development." And one may well ask, "Why do people choose to spend their valuable and usually too-short vacation time on personal development? Why don't they just have fun?"

One of the "truths" of the "human potential movement" is that people have a natural inclination toward self-development and growth, and given the opportunity, they will realize this desire with real pleasure and joy. We see this happening at The Space, and perhaps we will see it happen elsewhere in the future.

"Growth groups" take up where personal education in the family and at school have left off, or as is usually the case, have hardly begun. In these groups people can express themselves frankly, emotionally and with their bodies. Some people have hopes that modern institutions will have the wisdom to learn from these "avant-garde methods." Meanwhile a number of people who have profited from weekend groups during the year wish to continue their personal search. At The Space the groups are more informal and exploratory than professionally-led groups. But the motivation to find the joy in selfeducation is very much the same.

Reference

(1) See Liss, Jerome, *Free to Feel*, Wildwood House, London 1974.

This article will be continued next month with a look at the politics of the self regulating group.

David Porter

The Value of Nudity

I'd like to share with readers of "Self and Society" some thoughts I've had on the subject of nudity. At some encounter groups that I've attended nudity is an accepted part of the encounter. At others it may be considered irrelevant and may even be actively discouraged. Some people enjoy nudity. Others are "shocked" by it.