

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.*

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## 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.

My own experience in groups is that I like "showing off" my naked body and I like seeing and sometimes touching the naked bodies of others. When in the nude I find it easier to be honest and truthful about my thoughts and feelings. And I've discovered that I don't feel particularly vulnerable but in fact experience myself as being strong and powerful. I feel more loving towards those I like, and I feel less irritated and more sympathetic towards those whom I dislike or who dislike me. The group can provide a safe place in which feelings about nudity can be explored. And it is my belief that group nudity can be a valuable method of relaxing and of helping participants to feel less threatened by one another.

Nudity is important to me since, like many other people, I was taught that bodies were rather naughty things and that it was not nice to look at my own and other people's bodies. At the age of six I had wandered into a room where my elder sister was breast-feeding her new-born baby. She had hastily pulled her blouse across her exposed breast and the baby's mouth lest I should view such a disgusting sight! And at twelve I had dreaded the communal showers at school. One of the first things I was to learn in an encounter group a dozen or so years later was how to give myself permission to observe and be observed in situations of nudity. I was amused to discover the pleasant, warming effect that nudity could have upon the group as a whole. I was also embarrassed to learn that those of us newcomers who insisted upon wearing undergarments actually drew attention to ourselves and those parts of our bodies that were covered up! At the second group I attended I was able to strip off for a massage session quite easily and unashamedly.

There are a number of exercises that participants can do in group in order to find out their feelings about themselves and each other. One of these involves members taking turns to be "the one in the middle". Such an exercise is best done in the nude to encourage authenticity. Each person simply stands in the centre of the group and talks about her own body - what she likes about it and what she dislikes about it. She must not be interrupted since it is a chance for her to talk openly, sometimes for the first time in her life, about how she views herself. She is permitted to "show off", to brag, to boast, to flirt, to be a bit crazy, to demand attention, to be selfish - it doesn't matter what she says or does because in this exercise "it's o.k. to be self-centred" and in any case everyone else in the group will get a chance to be "the one in the middle".

When she has finished she can then ask the group for feedback. As stated earlier, I think it is important that the group *do not* make any comments until she asks for them since it is easy for her to become distracted or to adapt to other people's wishes. The group should give her feedback in a caring, constructive way. They might comment on her posture or gestures or facial expressions. They might compliment her with regard to particular parts of her body such as her hair or feet. They may also want to draw her attention to any parts that she has ignored or left out such as her buttocks or genitals. They may wish to comment on any veiled criticisms she has made (e.g. "I'm quite beautiful considering I'm so fat") or any attempts she

may make to take responsibility for others (e.g. "I'm sure you are all getting bored with me talking about myself like this").

This type of exercise can be fun as well as therapeutic, but for some people it can also be scary. Some participants need more time than others, and some may need lots of encouragement from the audience. Sometimes a person needs permission to discover the *good* things about himself, like the man who was so pre-occupied with his operation scar that he failed to admire and show off the rest of his body. And occasionally a person is unable to accept comments, like the woman who was so convinced of her ugliness that she stubbornly refused to accept compliments even when they were freely given.

In giving feedback, it is helpful if the audience develops a spirit of self-criticism. They can, for example, avoid comparative or competitive statements which might cause pain, e.g. "you are the most handsome man in the room" or "you've improved, considering how sulky you used to look". Sometimes the audience can work out their own strategy for dealing with people like the woman who thought herself ugly and who couldn't accept compliments. They may wish, for example, to write down all their comments on one piece of paper and then give it to her to read over to herself at a later date.

Exercises of this kind may have a profound effect upon everyday lives. We can often find it so easy to pick out our own and each others' faults and blemishes that we may need to re-educate ourselves in looking for the nice things. Contact with children is sometimes helpful in this context. Anyone who stops to listen to small children will notice how freely they give each other compliments and criticisms. One little girl spent several minutes telling me how smart she was!

Claude Steiner, in his book *"Scripts People Live"* has noted how "children are taught that modesty is the best policy and that self-praise and self-love are in some way sinful, shameful, and wrong". Adult life reinforces such tendencies - we hear phrases like "self-praise stinks!", "who do you think you are?" and "it's only me!"

When I first did this exercise I found that after about two minutes I ran out of good things to say about myself! This contrasted sharply with the fact that, as a youngster, I had spent five years telling child psychiatrists what was "wrong" with me! Indeed, showing off ourselves and our bodies goes against all that we are taught about how to "present" ourselves. Imagine going to your doctor and telling him how good your body is and how you don't need any of his medicines! Imagine telling your childhood games teacher that you don't care how quickly you can run, and that you don't care about the next boy who can lift heavier weights or kick a football further than you can! Imagine going swimming in the local public baths completely nude! Imagine writing a whole book about yourself entitled "Why I am a Beautiful Person"!

Some of us need permission to be nude because we have been taught to cover up and hide ourselves. As one woman commented in a massage group, our bodies have "rude bits". She then proceeded to smother her partner's breasts and genitals with talcum powder! I believe that the main reason for such hang-ups is not because of sex but because of excretion. Potty-training and it's consequences is a subject already well-documented. Suffice it to state that we usually recognise our genitals as excretory organs long before we learn about their sexual significances. Is it surprising then that some come to believe that our bodies have dark, nasty-smelling corners? Sometimes we begin to think this of our *whole* bodies.

Much of our scripting is competitive. We think of ourselves *compared* with others. We are anxious about the size and performance capacities of our genitals. We worry about facial blemishes or greying hair. Our bodies are bigger, smaller, younger, older, better, worse, slenderer, tougher, handsomer, uglier, and so forth. We label ourselves as being left-handed, freckled, short-sighted, disabled, effeminate, tomboyish, fat, thin. We learn to reject others - that person is not o.k. because he or she is poor, unemployed, uneducated, unfashionably dressed, handicapped, unmarried, queer, Jewish, Negro, or of a lower class or caste. Many of us need permission to accept ourselves and each other "just as we are".

The group can provide a chance to exaggerate some of our self-regard. Assuming the group is capable of providing the proper protection, when a participant encounters a feeling or thought that scares him he can "exaggerate" and explore whatever it is that is bothering him. Thus one woman, standing naked amongst other naked women, became aware of what she called her lesbian tendencies, i.e. her wish to sexually touch, and be touched by, other women. This frightened and disgusted her. She talked frankly about her desires, and later hugged all the women in the group!

I think that it is important that in the group nobody does anything that they don't want to do. It should be o.k. for participants to withdraw if they wish, providing that they state their intentions and don't expect others to run after and rescue them. One woman declared that she didn't want a lot of strangers "peering" at her, and it became clear that it would have been unwise to have pushed her into doing nude exercises. She simply withdrew and got on with preparing the supper!

A final point is that exercises of this kind usually need to be done over and over again. I have found that an occasional visit to an encounter group is not enough - the real challenge is in the big world outside. We need to make contracts with ourselves to bring about the changes we require. We must permit ourselves to discard acquaintances who ridicule us or cause us pain, and instead seek out friends who can accept us and help us to grow. We need people who will not be jealous of us and our achievements, but who can co-operate with us and support us. Our o.k.-ness is already there inside us - we need only to uncover it and bring it out into the open!

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