

THE EFFECT OF GROUP, SENSIBLE DIALOGUE, AND INNOVATIVE LEARNING

JOHN KEITH WOOD

*Sobriety doth rob me of delight,
And drunkenness doth drown my sense outright;
There is a middle state, it is my life,
Not altogether drunk, nor sober quite.*

Omar-i-Khayyam

Over the last twenty years I have written considerably on the person-centered approach and large group encounters. I have attempted to clarify the full implications of the approach and its applications which go well beyond individual psychotherapy. (Wood, 1995) In spite of its inevitable psychotherapeutic effect on *some* participants, considering the large group experience as therapy is not the most precise way to understand and utilize this form of human endeavor. In fact, the bulk of person-centered large group meetings would fail any test for an efficient and effective clinical psychotherapy. Frequently these gatherings hurt as much as they help. Nevertheless, they may be an important context for significant personal learning, as well as learning as a group. (Wood, 1984) I have suggested that the person-centered approach has tremendous potential, but perhaps because it demands so much of those who would practice it, this potential has not always been realized. (Wood, 1994a) Further, I have indicated the range of the large group's possibilities and how it might be studied. (Wood, 1994b, 1997) Finally, Much of what I have learned has been summarized in a brief overview. (Wood, 1999) These references are mentioned in order to establish a context for the present article and to limit repetition.

The intention of this article is:

1. To suggest some of the pitfalls inherent in what the American psychologist and philosopher William James (1896) called, "exceptional mental states."
2. To show that this realm of consciousness plays a major role – for better or worse – in large group encounters.
3. To suggest that the better is achievable. That is, a balanced, creative state of consciousness (coinciding with the heart of psychotherapeutic process) may be accessed within the sometimes chaotic ambience of these experiences.
4. To outline some of the conditions that favor significant dialogue and innovative learning in large groups.

THE HEART OF THE PSYCHOTHERAPY PROCESS

Although his fame has been derived largely from the psychotherapeutic technique he invented ("experiential psychotherapy"), I consider Eugene Gendlin's greatest contribution to be the conceptualization of the key phenomenon of effective therapeutic process. Using philosophical discourse he was able to capture the imagination and understanding of psychotherapists to relate constructively to the inner world of the client.

The knife edge of this process is "felt sense," the client's visceral experience that guides his or her exploration of meaning. Remaining in touch with a vital locus of feeling and deriving meaning from it, marks sharply a point of delicate balance where creative learning and integration of experience takes place and where it is possible (and usually likely) to fall off into a muddle on either side. In one direction there is a steep descent into excessive rationality or intellectualizing where one loses contact with emotion. The other side descends into murky emotionalism where extracting meaning becomes progressively more difficult.

In the best case, the psychotherapist assists the individual in focusing on the vital point of experience. Although it has been attempted, psychotherapy for individuals has not been extended satisfactorily to groups - beyond a sorry individual therapy conducted in front of others. Nor has the theory satisfyingly explained group process.

Nevertheless, there is a relation. Although arrived at quite differently, this moment of creative understanding and guidance for constructive action does occur in group participants. It also marks a mid-point along a continuum of various states of consciousness. The rational side would run from simply giving words to feelings, trying to be as precise as possible in order that the words inform the feelings, on out to complete intellectual domination, cold reductionism, lacking any heartfelt emotion. The emotional side would run from mild emotions that accompany the guiding feelings and expressions gained from derived meanings, out to the forfeit of all reasonable control, abandoned in a hysterical trance.

The advantage of the above perspective is that it not only relates individual and group therapy process but, due to its long history, provides ample examples that illustrate the possibility for both constructive and destructive behaviors. Thus, one may gain insight into an awareness of this creative state. And, through understanding, individuals may be more capable of coping with the bulging catalog of bizarre behaviors that occur in human groupings.

THE EDGE OF CREATIVITY: REAL LIFE

The 12th Century mystic Omar Khayyam considered the point where one experiences "real life" in the full spiritual sense to be a "middle state," occurring between the "sobriety" of excessive reason on one hand and the "drunkenness" of reckless emotion on the other. It is a delicate moment requiring the right measure of surrender and assertiveness.

FALLING OFF THE EDGE

In the 2nd Millennium BC, while foraging on the rocky crag of Greece's Mount Parnassus, a herd of goats stumbled upon the entrance to a cave. Under the mysterious influence of this place the animals behaved strangely, "as if not goats at all." The goatherd attracted by the commotion also fell under the spell. Curiosity seekers drawn to his ranting and subsequent prophecies, themselves entered into frenzies. Delirious, trembling, sweating, shuddering, both alarmed and joyful, many threw themselves into the abyss, never to be seen again.

This demonstrates the destructive power a strong new uncharted experience may have on participants. But there are many ways to navigate effectively within these turbulent emotions, imaginings, and thoughts.

It is written that the goddess who was the Earth and had created the universe harnessed the powers of this deep cavern overlooking the Gulf of Corinth. Respected prophecies were issued. A sanctuary to Apollo was eventually raised over the sacred grotto. In the 6th Century BC what Plato would call "the interpreter of religion to mankind" was well established in its thousand-year reign. In the most repeated telling, *Pythia* (the priestess) seated herself at the *adyton*, the center of the tripod (literally, the *oracle*) on the threshold of the chasm. She chewed a laurel leaf. Then she bent over and inhaled vapors emanating from the "navel of the earth." After "wrestling with Apollo," she was "dominated" and issued the famed *double entendres*. When interpreted, her divinations directed supplicants concerning decisions they faced, and guided the community: predicting future colonies, safe and productive trade routes, reliable alliances, and warning of plagues and crises.

Today the Delphic *oracle* is silent. However, tourists pouring over the sun-parched ruins may still discover the wisdom condensed from the "seven sages" after a thousand years of excursions within the middle state. Carved at the entrance of the Temple of Wisdom is this advice:

Know thyself (*Gnothi seauton*) - To paraphrase the German savant Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the universal is found in the single case, particularity in millions of cases. Know this single case, this true self, know where you fit in the whole of life. Realize your uniqueness and that you represent your time and place.

Nothing in excess (*Meden agan*) - Respect due measure and proportion, cultivating the middle state - neither "drunkenness" (unbridled subjection to one's emotions) nor "sobriety" (keen, but exclusive, intellectual judgment). Participate wholeheartedly, not holding back. Fight for your opinion. Give it up for a better one. Cultivate sincerity. Do what is needed, not what is merely desired.

I consider the achievement of these two pieces of advice to be the desirable attitude of participants entering a person centered large group experience. One should also become familiar with the roller coaster ride of chaotic emotions and imaginings in group encounters.

EXCEPTIONAL MENTAL STATES

William James (1929) has observed that, "Our normal waking consciousness ... is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different ... apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are all there in all their completeness."

Merely gathering together supplies such a requisite stimulus. Fantasies, denial, confusion are all part of what one may experience in group. Part of learning to live in such states is to accept that one is affected. Like a person when drunk, we feel quite natural, nothing unusual here. Others may see something quite different. Believing that we remain entirely "rational" in such situations defies our own eyes in viewing others.

For James (1896) exceptional mental states included such phenomena as dreams and hypnotism, automatism, hysteria, multiple personality, demonical possession, witchcraft, degeneration, and genius.

He did not feel that the mind slipped a gear, jumping from one state to another. The states formed a continuum. "Mediumistic possession in all its grades," he wrote, "seems to form a perfectly natural special type of alternate personality, and the susceptibility to it in some form is by no means an uncommon gift, in persons who have no other obvious nervous anomaly."

Most relevant for this article is what he called the "lower phases" of possession since this is the area involved in considering constructive large-group workshop experiences. It is in these phases creative, constructive, (always exceptional, but also) truly constructive behavior may occur. "Inspirational speaking, playing on musical instruments, etc.," he observed, "belong to the relatively lower phases of possession, in which *the normal self is not excluded from conscious participation in the performance, though their initiative seems to come from elsewhere.*" (My emphasis.) (James, 1890)

This is again the *middle state* introduced earlier. It includes neither the cold logic of the uninvolved, nor the psychotic behavior of the over-involved. It is a different state, not a mere juggling act between right and left hemispheric brain functions. It is possible that this *middle state* is the habitat for the individual's real (that is, perennial) life.

THE RANGE OF UNBRIDLED MIND

A state need not be dramatic, nor cast the person into exotic behavior. Some are so common they are rarely considered exceptional. As James (1896) has remarked, even "sleep would be a dreadful disease but for its familiarity." Thus, merely lying down, relaxing, falling asleep induces a trance. Dreaming is the vivid experience of this state. Daydreaming is another example. In this more receptive state, thoughts become more fluid, sometimes offering new ideas and insights. (Singer, 1976) Going *without* sleep may provoke psychotic symptoms. (Tyler, 1955)

Wonder, fear, grief and other strong emotions have also been associated with trance induction. The British psychiatrist William Sargant (1957) who treated World War II shell-shocked concluded that, "belief can be implanted in people, after brain function has been sufficiently disturbed by accidentally or deliberately induced fear, anger, or excitement. [And that] group manifestations are sometimes classed under the heading of 'herd instinct' and appear most spectacularly in wartime, during severe epidemics, and in all similar periods of common danger, which increase anxiety and so individual and mass suggestibility."

Somehow, place shapes perception, action, group policy. Europe's oldest sanctuary is in the valley of Dodona in Greece. Visions were said to have been interpreted from trance provoked by concentrating on the rustling of the wind in the leaves of the sacred oak tree as early as the 8th Century BC.

In a grand cathedral, a mosque, a temple, the tomb of a saint, one's shoulders may drop and consciousness, liberated from the dark moldy corners of the dense building, soars to include timeless reflections on life's meaning, one's purpose in a mysterious and inexplicable universe, humility, nobility.

On the other hand, even though one may not perceive the cause (or even refuse to believe it when demonstrated), an ugly, crowded space, can provoke "monotony, fatigue, headache, sleep, discontent, irritability, hostility and avoidance" (Mintz, 1956). A drugstore, basketball game and other settings have been shown to affect consciousness and human behavior in accordance with the *requirements* of their

structure. (Barker, 1968) How much more is a group meeting room, under subdued lighting, in a beautiful resort setting, likely to affect one?

Even the air we breathe may have an effect on a person's mood. Irritable and impulsive behavior may be provoked by certain weather fronts which are followed by dry hot winds "of ill-repute" pushing air with high concentrations of positive ions. Breathing air containing large numbers of small *negative* ions, on the other hand, induces comfortable moods. From scatterbrained irritability to relaxed introspection. Negative ions are abundant in the clean air surrounding beaches, waterfalls and glacial peaks. Perhaps it is no coincidence that these places often figure in inspirational experiences. These are also frequent sites for large group workshops. (Kreuger & Reed, 1976)

Culture also has an important influence on consciousness as emphasized by the Princeton psychologist Julian Jaynes. (1976) He calls the "collective cognitive imperative" a belief system of "culturally agreed-upon expectancy or prescription, which defines the particular form of a phenomenon and the roles to be acted out within that form."

William James (1896) recognized that "the mind seems to embrace a confederation of psychic entities." Thus, even without excessive stimulation, participants may adopt respective roles and behaviors (victims, scapegoats, jesters, protectors, leaders) within the group which dictate their behavior. Group roles may deviate significantly from one's ordinary life. Nevertheless, participants seem to be exceptionally agile at adapting to the requirements of the cultural context. They may be influenced without their conscious knowledge to behave in ways in which the group approves. Study, for example, the prisoners and guards experiment conducted at Stanford University. (Hancy, Banks & Zimbardo, 1973)

During his investigations of mediumistic phenomena in the United States, James (1890) noted this in the universality of behavior in those "in touch with spirits." He writes that, "It seems exactly as if one author composed about half of the trance-messages, no matter by whom they are uttered." Furthermore, "the odd thing is that persons unexposed to spiritualist traditions will so often act in the same way when they become entranced, speak in the name of the departed, go through the motions of their several death-agonies, send messages about their happy home in the summer-land, and describe ailments of those present."

When a person behaves in a way that is contrary to his self-image he may experience "cognitive dissonance." Frequently the person reinterprets the behavior in a way that causes it to be consistent with this image. (Festinger, 1957)

For example, a young man voluntarily speaks up in a large gathering. He expresses his opinions, personal feelings, private thoughts. Some participants nod their heads. Some show little interest. The group, in general, treats him as it had previous speakers.

At the end of the episode, he appears content. Nevertheless, in the following meeting of the group, he announces that he felt "betrayed by the group." He feels that the "group took advantage" of him and "pressured" him "into going too far." He feels "exposed" and ashamed. He blames the group for seducing him to reveal a characterization of himself that was at odds with his self-image.

All of the above – interrupted sleep patterns and eating habits, experiencing intense and varied emotions, exposed to a different ambience, cultural influences, experiences which confound a person's sense of self – and more, may be present in large group workshops. Of course, participants' behaviors are without exception affected.

The further reaches

There is a further range of experience that occurs only rarely and significantly less dramatic in large group workshops but is part of the continuum and merits notice. In the 14th Century, ecstatic dancing suddenly broke out in the lower Rhine country in Europe. It was characterized by people leaping and screaming, foaming with frenzy. It was called St. Vitus Dance, which remains a metaphor for describing a fit of insanity. The afflicted danced for hours "as if bathed in blood." Attempted cures only spread the contagion.

In 1787 in Lancashire a woman put a mouse down the neck of a female co-worker in a cotton factory. The victim, terrified of mice, entered a fit of violent convulsions. The next day the contagion affected three more women. By the fourth day twenty-four persons, including a man who exhausted himself restraining the others similarly succumbed. Accompanied by a rumor that "cotton poisoning" was the cause, the malady spread to nearby factories. (Sargant, 1957)

Victims of this and other "enthusiasm" got down on all fours, leaped like frogs, growled, snapped, and barked like dogs. "These last were particularly gifted in prophecies, trances, dreams, rhapsodies, visions of angels, of heaven, and of the holy city." (Sargant, 1957)

Religious rituals may provoke similar behavior. One need not believe in the religion to be influenced. For example, a medium in an African-Brazilian cult said of her first experience, "I thought the mediums were just faking. ... When it came my turn to speak with the spirit of the cult leader, I stood about half a meter from him. He put his hand on my forehead and I became dizzy. I felt as if I had taken an alcoholic drink. I felt strange, and it seemed as if I were going under. Suddenly my vision disappeared. I no longer knew where I was. When I came to, I was bathed in perspiration from dancing with the other spirits." (Goodman, et al, 1974)

Resisting the induction may actually facilitate it, as the American anthropologist Maya Deren (1970) found out. To her consternation and embarrassment and despite attempts to avoid succumbing, she was possessed during a *Voudoun* ceremony she was observing in Haiti.

Inasmuch as group encounters often involve fatigue, rewards and punishments, alienation, distrust, information control, restructuring reality, attacks on beliefs, forced participation in group discussions, repetition, self-criticism and public confessions, they resemble religious rituals and deliberate thought control programs. When anxiety, a sense of real or imagined guilt, and a conflict of loyalties are frequently experienced, it is not difficult to illicit the desired conversion or confession.

HARNESSING THE BEAST

Wild and woolly states of mind may also be harnessed for constructive purposes. From the near east many examples of achieving the constructive *middle state* may be found. For example, the Jewish Testament records that the prophet "walked with God," moved by a volition not his own.

Exceptional states were induced in a variety of ways. The Hebrew prophet Moses, for instance, when bringing his people's cause before the Lord, enveloped himself in fumes before giving utterance. He "entered into the tent where the pillar of cloud descended and stood at the door of the tent. And the Lord spake ... unto Moses face to face as a man speaketh to his friend." (Numbers 11, 25)

Likewise, 18th Century Protestant religious revivals in Europe and the United States produced reports of constructive experiences. For example, in Northampton, Massachusetts, Jonathon Edwards convened vast crowds eager for socializing and excitement. The preaching converted many. On warm summer and autumn nights, enthusiasts did not return home. Thus, the residential group meetings (not unlike person-centered large groups in many ways) were born.

William McGreedy, pastor of Muddy River church in Logan County, Kentucky, described the grip these meetings had on participants. "A very great number of people of every age ... were struck down ... they fell in the camps, on their way home, and after they got there." Pale and trembling, falling to the ground, as if shot dead, jerking and dancing, were all common behaviors. On awakening, they would remember nothing. In the excitement, some delivered powerful sermons, which influenced many. According to one observer, they spoke long and loud, enough to "be heard at a distance of a mile." (Cleveland, 1916)

When habitual patterns of thinking are not in force the person may experience "reality" in completely different ways. What once was regarded as "impossible," may become possible; even superhuman feats. The American hypnosis researcher Arnold Ludwig (1967) says of such experiences, "The person no longer seems bound to the necessity for syllogistic reasoning"; in this state, "the distinctions between cause and effect may vanish, the notion of time may become more relative, opposites can coexist and not seem contradictory. ... A type of 'perceptual cognitive restructuring' tends to occur in which the individual has available new avenues of experience and expression."

A constructive experience relies on employing the "normal self" together with the "initiative that comes from elsewhere." In other words, learning how to function effectively in the *middle state*. Specialists in the tradition guide the initiate so as to avoid possessions which are violent and brutal, encouraging those that are progressive and constructive. Maria José, a *mãe do Santo* in the African-Brazilian *macumba* relates, "Whatever the nature of the trance may be," she continues, "the personality of the medium has nothing to do with it. One minute the medium is herself and the next minute, she no longer exists: the god has entered her body. ... Sometimes the childlike beginning stage lasts a bit too long, becoming turbulent and disrupting the whole ceremony. ... If this happens, I have to intervene." (Bramly, 1977) The cult leader and the commanding principles of the system provide a framework in which to guide the experience constructively.

Anyone who has participated in intensive large group encounters will recognize that participants think and act differently (even at times to the contrary) from the way they think and act alone. Though they may behave in ways that surprise, perplex, disappoint, and even embarrass themselves and others, they are normal people, often from the helping professions in Europe, North and South America, who merely sit in a circle and talk. It appears that with no prearranged system of conversing, no special effort, when people speak of personal concerns, politics, inflation, virtually any subject (but especially when they simply express honestly what they are feeling at the moment), they can begin to behave as if they are not "themselves." Some may have also experienced a moment of exceptional clarity and learning. This, of course, is what makes the ordeal worthwhile. Unlike traditional systems, there is no guiding hand. Group members, by being informed and sensitive, must guide each other. This is a major reason for this exposition.

THE VALUE OF EXCEPTIONAL MENTAL STATES

It is unlikely that such states are an evolutionary blunder. As Ludwig (1966) has quipped, it is difficult to believe that humans have developed the capacity to enter and function in trance merely to provide subjects for nightclub hypnotists. Indeed, Sargant (1957) suspects that "If the ordinary human brain had not possessed a special capacity of adaptation to an ever-changing environment – building up ever-changing conditioned reflexes and patterns of responses, and submitting for the time being when further resistance seemed useless – mankind would never have survived." Furthermore, its potential value should not be discounted because of associations with weird religious practices. James cautioned, "We cannot offhandedly dismiss even the claims of any religion, including those of spiritualists and mental healers, if by their beliefs they contribute to making the world a better place to live." (Taylor, 1999)

Thus, exceptional mental states may be important in releasing human potential and improving the functioning of human communities. Traditional societies and communities which have succeeded in extracting wisdom from trance states certainly think so. And, they can throw more light on how this outcome may come about.

Traditional practices for facilitating personality change run from solitary quiet meditations on the one end of the spectrum to the violent rituals on the other. (Jilek, 1974) Expressing one's feelings to kind listeners in a private room would fall somewhere between these extremes. What separates spurious possession from constructive experience is the context in which the experience takes place. In traditional systems (as well as in modern psychotherapy) the framework is established by a ritual.

Since they outlast the individual, the community and its rituals are, in a sense, more "real." The ritual embodies the community's collective memory, values and wisdom. In addition to preserving the knowledge of the system, it provokes an exceptional mental state in participants that renders them receptive to the commanding principles of the system. Thus, the states provide one of the accesses to perennial knowledge.

The ritual projects the system's principles by virtue of a specifically selected place, decorative symbols, singing, dancing, drumming, and ceremonial focus on specific gods that combine to redefine reality. "Individual thought and feeling are transcended by collective action and sentiment. Individual attention is transmuted into collective preoccupation." (Ravencroft, 1965) This could easily describe a large group workshop.

In traditional systems, the cult leader provides the critical faculty which guides a medium until he or she can function effectively in trance. Also, this occurs in an accepting cultural framework and in turn enhances that framework. Deren (1970) describes *Voudoun* as a "religion of major stature, rare poetic vision and artistic expression [where] the collective functions at a level superior to the creative capacities of the individuals who make it up. It does not rise from their grace, their power, their knowledge. It confers these upon them. ... The individual participates in the accumulated genius of the collective, and by such participation becomes himself a part of that genius - something more than himself. *His exaltation results from his participation*, it does not precede and compel it." (Italics in the original- Deren, 1970.)

Healing

One of the functions of traditional groups seems to be the promotion of healing. The Zar healing ritual is said to alleviate and cure symptoms of mild depression, anxiety, somatoform disorders, and chronic schizophrenia in a "last resort" form of treatment. The American professors of psychiatry Armando Favazza and Ahmed Faheem (1983) state, "The Zar ceremony results in neither insight nor verbalization of social-psychological problems nor working through conflicts. Rather, emotions are aroused and intensified through

the dramatization of a dangerous confrontation with evil spirits. The special ceremonial atmosphere, the rituals, and the wearing of new clothes heighten the drama.”

Releasing human potential

In the absence of methods of guidance the trance could turn destructive (or at best, worthless) to the individual or to the community. Take for example the Songhay migrants in West Africa. Returning to the Ivory Coast from visiting the Gold Coast where ritual possession was practiced. They became aroused by drumming and were possessed, not by the spirits of the ancient tradition or archetypal gods, but by the cultural icons they had encountered: the governor general of the Gold Coast, senior officers in the West African Rifles, even the railway engine that carts them to and fro. In trance, they behave as they believe they “ought” to, miming the gestures realistically of the “spirits” that possess them. (Sargant, 1957)

Some industrial age cultures have combined with traditional systems to create novel practices. For example, in Northern Manitoba Canada, the Cree Indians, instead of using animal entrails or tea leaves in the bottom of a cup or sea shells thrown across a kitchen table, “read the signs” in soap operas such as *The Edge of Night* in order to make predictions and decisions about the future. (Gransberg, Steinbring & Hamer, 1977)

The extraordinary powers of the trance, when disciplined, incorporate the tradition’s accumulated wisdom, providing guidance to the group, to heal, to help deal with stress, to promote individual awareness, and to advance the social order of the community.

Transpersonal awareness may also be realized. In Haiti, participants in the *Voudoun* ceremonies, “learn love and beauty in the presence and person of *Erzulie*, experience the ways of power in the diverse aspects of *Ogoun*, become familiar with the implications of death in the attitudes of *Ghede*. A participant sings in the chorus, and feels in his own person that surge of security which is harmonious collective action. He witnesses the wisdom of ancestral and divine counsel, with its history and experience, for his own guidance in action. In effect, he understands the principles because he sees them function.”

“The ritual,” Deren (1970) further observes, “reaffirms first principles - destiny, strength, love, life, death; it recapitulates a man’s relationship to his ancestors, his history, as well as his relationship to the contemporary community; it exercises and formalizes his own integrity and personality, tightens his disciplines, confirms his morale. In sum, he emerges with a strengthened and refreshed sense of his relationship to cosmic, social and personal elements. ... *The miracle is, in a sense, interior. It is the doer who is changed by the ritual, and for him, therefore, the world changes accordingly.*”

Deren concludes, “For in the final analysis, what is important, is not only what the servitor does (which might conceivably be the right thing for the wrong reasons) nor what he consciously understands (which would vary according to his intellectual capacity) but *what he has become* as a result of his participation in those ceremonials.”

To organize the community’s values, direction, and decisions

The African Brazilian cults, such as *macumba*, constitute a system, which preserves the community’s accumulated knowledge in ritual. “My son,” explains Maria José, “our gods and spirits are all we have. We have nothing else, no sacred texts, no monuments, no enduring references. That is both our weakness and our strength.” How the medium feels, personally, is not significant to Maria José. The trance benefits the community. The medium is called a “horse” and volunteers her body and self to be “ridden” by the spirit (Bramly, 1977). Also, it is clear from the concept of the medium as a “vessel” to be filled by the spirit that he or she and the “filling” process, that is the ritual that provokes trance, and the trance itself are means to an end. It is the “message of the spirit” that is central. The ceremony, according to Maria José, brings the person who lives in an unreal and deceptive world, imprisoned in that world of his or her own ideas, back to the true nature. Deren adds, “It is toward the achievement of this – toward the forcing open of the door of the source – that the entire structure of *Voudoun* is directed. The serviteur must be induced to surrender his ego, that the archetype become manifest.”

In Ghana, when a spirit “takes” a person, he or she becomes an oracle for *obusum*. Through disciplined training he learns to speak coherently in trance, bringing messages to the community. The medium’s utterances seem to develop through a “curious blend of gainfully directed hysteria and patient self-discipline.” (Field, 1960) This is a precise description of the *middle state*.

Transpersonal Awareness

Traditional ritual dances do not seem to be so much expressions of individuals as they are expressions of a set of values (Williams, 1971). The ritual serves purposes, which transcend individuality.

“To worship the loa,” writes Deren (1970), “is to celebrate the principle, not the matter in which it may be momentarily or permanently manifest. ... The function of and purpose of such divine manifestation is the reassurance and the instruction of the community.”

A harmonious group may be a starting point, not end point, of transpersonal awareness. The special state of consciousness is a capacity for greater purposes: “in all this cosmic variety, the constant is the mind of man. ... It is as if the mind, by-passing the particularities of circumstance, the limitations and imprecisions of the senses, arrived, by paths of metaphysical reason, at some common principled truth of the matter.” (Deren, 1970)

Innovative Learning

James’s description of a state where “the normal self is not excluded from conscious participation in the performance, though the initiative seems to come from elsewhere” or Khayyam’s “neither drunk nor sober” is a state more easily achieved than explained. Deren (1970) observes, this “system of mental and emotional convictions upon which the very survival of the community is dependent, does not, and *could* not require of them that they perceive and understand its principles on an abstract, metaphysical level in order that they be inspired to participate in it. On the contrary, every possible physical technique - particularly drumming and dancing - is used to involve the individuals in activities in which those metaphysical and moral principles are structurally implicit, so that these are, in a sense, unconsciously absorbed by the participant. This is no more, but certainly no less, than a highly developed form of ‘learning by doing’ educational method. ... Indeed, it is precisely because these concepts have been unconsciously absorbed and have become the very premises of their subsequent thought-patterns, that the individuals are least aware of them as explicit concepts.”

Large group encounters are capable of this same range of phenomena: healing, organizing the community’s values, wise self-direction and decision-making, provoking transpersonal awareness, and innovative learning for releasing human potential.

CONDITIONS THAT FAVOR SIGNIFICANT DIALOGUE AND INNOVATIVE LEARNING IN LARGE GROUP MEETINGS

Large group meetings of the person-centered approach are tribal rituals – a subgroup of the collection of activities mentioned above. Consider dress. A relaxed, casual style of uniform is typical. Frequently tee shirts with slogans emblazoned on the chest plate are used. The tribe is acephalous, inasmuch as there is no single leader and the members participate in decision-making and are supposedly equal in status. Although many participants are atheists, an exact belief is unwittingly practiced. For the sacred autonomy of the individual, for example, the group will fight fiercely—both within and without its own ranks. Part of the ritual that produces hyperaesthesia consists of breaking with ordinary life, confessing feelings in public, confronting diverse values in tedious sessions that are frequently indecisive, experiencing confusion, ambiguity, strong emotions, prolonged silences in the general assemblies, going with little sleep, irregular meals, celebrating and other means of emotional arousal. “Sharing feelings” could be said to replace drumming and dancing. Having been rendered suggestible, the individual is assisted by the group to explore “elevated consciousness,” a closer identity with the group, just as in the more readily recognizable tribes. The modern tribe does not lack of legends, myths, tradition, initiation rites, councils of elders debating the finer points of law (“therapist conditions”) and so forth. Though not always reaching the extremes of behavior that may occur in traditional meetings, large group workshops do exhibit a similar pattern. The group participant’s task is the same: to arrive at the middle state where creativity and integration may enhance the community’s effectiveness.

Groups are best at dealing with what is most urgent at the moment

When anticipating the formation of a group or a group meeting, the very first question to consider is, “Is this group meeting really *necessary*?” “Team building” meetings for the staff of an institution, planning committees without specific tasks, faculty meetings are examples of gatherings that are not likely to provoke significant dialogue. They may serve other purposes. On the other hand, creative resources of practically any group are called up by urgency, by a crisis, by a clear purpose.

Place and time are organizational choices

By being aware of environmental factors that influence the “effect of group” an appropriate place and time may be chosen so that the surroundings facilitate, instead of impeding, the achievement of the group’s goals.

The composition of group participants is a choice that organizers make (even when they decide not to decide on any given makeup)

Diversity of culture, life experience, values, and gender balance definitely enhance the group's potential for creativity. Naturally, each participant will have multiple intentions. And circumstances will alter some intentions. Even in the religious camp meetings there were adventures that had little to do with religion. "The free intercourse of all ages and sexes under cover of the night and the woods was not without its temptations. It is also to be feared that they gave rise to false notions of religion by laying too much stress on bodily exercises, and substituting them in place of moral virtues or inward piety. These were too often considered as evidence of a change of heart and affections, though they neither proved or disproved anything of the kind."

Nevertheless, participants should share one common formal intention. By accepting an invitation to join the group, they should agree to do something together.

Group members need not be polite to one another. They need not be nice. They need not withhold negative feelings. They should be assertive in sharing their best idea with the group. And they should be graceful in surrendering it for a better one that moves the group in a constructive direction.

The consequences of lack of good will were illustrated by a participant in a workshop bringing together members of three African states involved in a border dispute. He had this to say, "My own observation is that there is no direct relationship between the development of empathy and the extent to which the delegates were able to free themselves from commitments to the policies already held by their respective governments on the issue." (John Okumu of Kenya in Doob, et al, 1970)

"In other words, the opening up of the self during the training phase and the free and open discussions relative to the problem, its magnitude, and its costliness, together with the effort expended in the [small] groups to suggest possible ways and means to achieving a lasting peace came to nought."

Compared to the atmosphere of mutual trust and confidence in the smaller gatherings the general assembly "became an anti-climax: many individuals spoke up mostly for purposes of exhibition, a characteristic of public negotiations and parliamentary procedures. Perhaps for this and other covert reasons the consensual basis of group action exhibited in the small groups was totally lacking. The general assembly thus fell short of the expectation that it would be an integral part of a process of generating better communications and understanding of vital questions."

Group dialogue can be improved with a learning attitude

Even when there is no intention to do so, the "effect of group" makes the manipulation of thought or behavior a possibility. Being informed of such possibilities makes it more likely that group members may navigate the turbulent sea of consciousness to arrive at the calm port of the middle state. In order to progress in understanding and to foster significant dialogue and innovative learning in groups one should begin with careful self-observation in group settings. Thus, one may verify for himself or herself how exceptional mental states of mind are experienced.

This activity is not merely a casual glancing about. It is a disciplined progression of awareness while participating fully in the phenomenon being observed. This involves looking, listening, smelling, tasting, and touching. With experience and imagination or intuition one may "see" or "feel" or "divine" what the group is expressing.

Goethe has said it well: "Every act of looking turns into observation, every act of observation into reflection, every act of reflection into the making of associations; thus, it is evident that we theorize every time we look carefully at the world. The ability to do this with clarity of mind, with self-knowledge, in a free way, and ... with irony, is a skill we will need in order to avoid the pitfalls of abstraction and attain the results ... which can find a living and practical application." (Naydler, 1996)

AMBIGUITY AND CONFUSION

Contradictory injunctions such as "Be yourself!" or "Be spontaneous!" which may be stated or merely be implicit may provoke ambiguous feelings in participants. Also as Frank (1961) has noted, the "steadfast refusal to assume active leadership tends to create an ambiguous situation [for some participants who have only] a vague idea what [they] are supposed to do, how long ... to keep it up, and how [to know when it] is finished. ... To the extent that the person cannot unaided construct a clear set of expectations in a situation, he tends to look to others for direction. This may explain the finding that confusion increases suggestibility."

Conditions that have been used to manipulate thoughts and behavior in others do occur in large group meetings. However, when recognized they may be exposed. Sensory deprivation, drugs, re-interpreting one's life, making confessions, are not *required and should not be encouraged*.

CONFORMITY

In a large group workshop a participant who witnessed the group turning against a member later remarked, he was "unquestionably wounded and angered" and "I just cannot forgive myself that I let this happen to him." (Doob & Foltz, 1973)

One explanation for this conformity deals with "pluralistic ignorance": each person looks at the others and thinks, "Since no one else is concerned, I guess there is nothing wrong here." (Latané & Darley, 1968) One may note in this case how an exclusive sensitivity to the group satisfying its needs, accomplishing its goals, may prejudice the individual.

The Austrian psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut (1985) in a review of group behavior has another explanation. He suggests that a portion of the membership of any large group will be allowed, by the group as a whole, to heckle, ridicule, suppress, or even insult a member - acts which its ethics would not permit the whole group to do. Thus, at times, a person or a small group may assume leadership to accomplish an unpleasant goal that the group as a whole *wants* but also wishes to *disown*. When the act is completed, a sense of guilt would naturally occur to those whose desires conflicted with their ethics, even though they did not participate directly in any crime.

In a healthy group, participants defend each other's right to participate in their own way, at their own pace, even to participate by remaining silent or withdrawing. Participants are not discouraged from criticizing any aspect of the event. Another corrective to implicit suggestion as well as brainwashing is that the organizers do not stand outside the process or assume a role different from any participant. What effects group members, affects the organizers as well. Everyone is expected to bring his or her best and fullest participation.

BRAINWASHING

In deliberate attempts to implant belief in others there is usually a definite goal. In the beginning of Chinese communism there was the goal of creating the "new man." In prison reform programs, it may be the "correct member of society." In religion, the "saved soul." In psychotherapy, a "well-rounded individual."

The fact that a group may have as a goal "to become all you can become" or "to grow as a person" does not mean it is immune from the effects of conditioning. However, if such intentions are addressed and discussed from the point of view of the underlying motives of an individual and the group in adopting such beliefs, becoming brainwashed is less likely.

PUBLIC CONFESSIONS

The public confession of feelings may be part of a large group meeting. However, there should be no demand for this. Usually the person expressing her sentiments is moved by an inner urge - to feel herself integrated, to understand something about herself - not to contribute to a public mind or public conscience. The act should not be applauded as good, helpful or even desirable. A sense of oneness may be felt by other participants, but not usually as a result of continued confessions.

When any activity goes on long enough to insult the sensitivities of the group, or begins to be enacted mechanically, someone generally calls it to a halt. The price of re-entry becomes genuine necessity and honesty. Participants can increasingly discern honesty, sincerity, movements toward integrity. Guilt may be guilt; disappointment, disappointment; joy may be allowed to be joy. The individual need not be liked but should be accepted.

A great deal has been written by the American psychologist Carl Rogers and by many others regarding the "facilitative conditions" for constructive personality change and for effective group encounters. I do not wish to repeat this material. However, it must be said that in an effective large group dialogue some active members will be feeling accepted by others, will feel understood empathically, and will regard these others as acting in a genuine way - nothing up their sleeves. This is a significant aspect of effective large group dialogue. Although it may be that not everyone requires special training in order to assume such attitudes and behaviors, it is worthwhile to be familiar with Rogers's original articles dealing with this subject within the context of his work. (Rogers, 1946, 1947, 1955, 1957, 1961, 1963)

JARGON AND CLICHÉ

Jargon and cliché signify more than a mere violation of style. Totalist language, writes Robert Lifton (1961), “is repetitiously centered on all-encompassing jargon, prematurely abstract, highly categorical, relentlessly judging, and to anyone but its most devoted advocates, deadly dull.”

In the 19th Century, the French sociologist Gustave LeBon (1895) had already noticed that, “Reason and arguments are incapable of combating certain words and formulas. They are uttered with solemnity in the presence of crowds, and as soon as they have been pronounced an expression of respect is visible on every countenance, and all heads are bowed.”

In every meeting there is jargon brought into the group and jargon invented in the gathering. Parody is perhaps the best remedy. If participants can laugh at themselves and their prized inventions they have a chance for significant dialogue.

HONEST FEEDBACK

Transparency of organization, goals, feelings, opinions, and values together with honest expression do much to foster significant dialogue. In groups with authoritarian leadership there are the expected dangers of coercion. But even in group-centered activities totalitarian characteristics may develop. The corrective is to challenge the language of totalism when it is used. It has been observed that “correct feedback was more significant in increasing independence than incorrect feedback was in increasing conformity.”

SUMMARY

In spite of the impression of constancy, the human consciousness is extraordinarily flexible. Among the ways variations of consciousness – that is, *exceptional mental states* - may be provoked in group participants are by:

- merely gathering under the social and cultural imperatives of the group (Jaynes, 1976),
- the structure and constituents of the place and time (Barker, 1968),
- being isolated from routine daily life,
- living in strange surroundings,
- speaking in front of a large number of strangers,
- listening to and confessing feelings in public (Lifton, 1961),
- listening to charismatic presentations (Ludwig, 1967),
- confronting opposing values, opinions, habits,
- emotional excitement (including anger, fear, frustration) (Sargant, 1957), (Goodman, et al, 1974),
- music, singing and dancing (Deren, 1970),
- intense concentration in an attempt to surmount interpersonal and intrapersonal crises,
- merely relaxing the critical faculties (Ludwig, 1966),
- enduring problem-solving sessions which can be prolonged, boring and frustrating, often ending in indecision, confusion, ambiguity (Frank, 1961),
- boredom: sitting through tiring meetings where little is accomplished (Heron, 1957),
- withstanding fatigue, lack of sleep and unspecified emotional tension (Tyler, 1955),
- maintaining long late-night vigils with a troubled friend,
- fasting (Field, 1960),
- using alcohol and other mild drugs,
- using caffeine,
- concentrating attention, often under subdued light, on a single voice, one unsolvable problem, a universal question, a life decision,
- sitting together during long meditative silences.

An attitude for innovative learning

These manifestations may be considered, not as isolated phenomena but, as the multiplicity in unity: the effect of gathering together. This phenomenon is most relevant for constructive group behavior when, as James described, “the normal self is not excluded from conscious participation in the performance, though their initiative seems to come from elsewhere.” That is, when participants can function effectively in a *middle state* – neither totally critical nor totally abandoned to the trance.

By accepting that the group has an effect, one may relax, while maintaining the critical faculties active. A complete relaxation of the “I” consciousness may encourage destructive behavior. With a proper balance of the “I” consciousness and the “we” consciousness one’s perceptions and mental powers may be extended. The “impossible,” may be rendered possible. Opposing values may co-exist without contradiction.

Thus, the person is capable of self-governance, independent thought and action, and expression of his unique thoughts, opinions, beliefs and perceptions in reacting to the group. He can also maintain a separate identity, experiencing personal values and feelings and thoughts in a larger context than merely the present moment. The individual may balk at an unjust movement toward unanimity in the group by saying, “Wait a minute. This does not feel right to me. I will not take part in this activity and I urge the group to find an alternative.”

At the same time, the person is able to live fully in the present moment, abandoning pride, a sense of personal significance, to surrender to something of greater significance, something that transcends the personal. One may vigorously put forward his or her best idea for a solution to a serious problem the group faces and then, in the next moment, relinquish the idea, belief, doctrine, perception for one superior. These seemingly paradoxical viewpoints are complementary manifestations of the *middle state*. One offers his best, then surrenders it for what’s better.

Furthermore, the participant is able to live unattached to a particular form: at one time, favoring no structured activities; at another time, a highly organized structure. Since solutions, which worked before or were successful in other groups are not necessarily effective in a different situation, the person may surrender even the understanding gained from past experience, to live with doubts, with fears, but without being governed by them.

In this state, one may gain new perceptions, special insights that help make wise decisions, resolve problems and generally benefit the individual and the group. Becoming aware of each individual as unique and at the same time not different from the whole is also possible. “By-passing the particularities of circumstances, the limitations and imprecisions of the senses, [the mind arrives] by paths of metaphysical reason, at some common principled truth of the matter.” (Deren, 1970)

Organizing

Before the face-to-face encounters, organizers may optimize the conditions for effective large group learning. In fact, this is by far the most important thing they will likely do. It is, in a real sense, the only thing that the organizers can do to facilitate a learning-by-doing experience. Thus, it is a highly specialized task. Not to be sloughed off on inexperienced volunteers. It should be undertaken only by people especially prepared – if not by previous group experience, by life itself. The organizers must determine:

- Necessity
Does a *real* need exist? The motive for convening the group should not be merely economical or for social relations. It should involve some urgency, something they believe in wholeheartedly.
- Time and place
Arranging the time and place for meeting. Considering what place, what organizational structure, will more likely facilitate significant dialogue and creative thinking.
- People
Inviting participants for diversity but with a shared intention.
- Active involvement in the meetings
Once the group meeting is under way, nobody is in charge and everybody is in charge. Organizers participate as anyone else, helping and hurting the process.

Observation and experience in groups helps increase one’s awareness to the dangers and suggest ways to deal with them. Learning how to navigate in the *middle state* is an art. This implies cultivating the state in which one “is at once exotically self-involved and heroically selfless.” (Konner, 1985) Or, another way of saying it, by developing a “curious blend of gainfully directed hysteria and patient self-discipline.” (Field, 1960) Surely knowing more about human nature, group behavior and the middle state would make one a better psychotherapist.

Constructive group outcomes

Desirable outcomes of the group encounter include:

- Positive changes in the self-perception of participants and increased insight into the meaning of their lives. (healing)

- The opportunity to subjectively experience that the individual is the place for “presencing” the whole (Bortoft, 1996). (transpersonal)
- Enhanced interpersonal relations.
- Achieving sensible dialogue.
- Resolution of conflict and crises through integrating opposing values. (Wood, 1999)
- Becoming proficient in innovative learning (Botkin, Elmandjra & Malitza, 1979).
- Creative problem-solving. (Wood, 1984)
- Going beyond democracy to a self-government that includes using participatory intuition to intelligently coordinate activities without legislation or explicit parliamentary procedures. (Wood, 1984)
- Becoming aware of culture and how it is formed and transformed in a compassionate and efficient process that involves, respects and benefits its members and itself. (Wood, 1984)
- Releasing human potential
- Becoming aware of community values
- Transpersonal awareness (Wood, 1994b)

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