

# Community Trance-formation

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*As the Pilgrim passes while the Country permanent remains. So Men pass on; but the States remain permanent forever.*

William Blake

In groups where personal sentiments are freely expressed it is also not uncommon to observe the following event: A man speaks to the group. Apparently voluntarily, he reveals feelings, private thoughts, some details of his life. He seems satisfied with the conclusion. However, the next day he announces to the meeting that he feels ashamed. He feels the group "took advantage" of him and "pressured" him. Surprised group members deny this. Many cannot even remember what the man talked about. They merely afforded him, in their opinion, the same support and respect other speakers received. Nevertheless, he maintains that, "I was pushed farther than I wanted to go."

A statement from a similar workshop group, organized by Leonard Doob and associates at Yale (1), illustrates a dissociated state of consciousness also found in intensive group meetings: "One man stood up in amazement at a large group session and recounted that he had just walked out of a campus shop in a daze and then discovered that he had taken a ballpoint pen without paying for it. Another found himself 'walking around outside just talking to myself — I've never done that before.' Another reported not having slept for three nights."

Profoundly positive experiences — often attributed to alterations in consciousness — can also be found in group meetings. During one emotionally-filled period in a workshop group a woman shared a "vision," a sharp mental picture of a forest scene. At that moment another group member was silently weeping. Through the suddenly flooding tears, this person told of the startling effect of having her "mind read." She had, in fact, been grieving her "beloved wooded land" that had recently been taken from her.

These are examples of a few mental states encountered in intensive group meetings. The person is not always individual; in a group he or she is frequently dividua — a divisible collection of competing personalities. In such settings people often hold convictions quite different (even at times to the contrary) from those they would hold if alone. In the group they may behave in ways that surprise, even embarrass, themselves later. They may be confused, perplexed, disappointed with their own

behavior. They can also be euphoric, as with feelings of unity or prophetic insight.

What effect does the group setting have on the mind of an individual? It is certain that convenors of workshops using a person-centered approach do not intend to coerce participants. However, considering Joost Meerlo's statement (2) that, "it is easier to manipulate the minds of others than to avoid doing so," is it possible that unintentionally conditions are established which do manipulate the minds of participants? If so, what are the consequences?

*Trance* — According to Ronald Shor (3) the usual state of consciousness is characterized by a certain frame of reference. It is called the "generalized reality-orientation," and in the background of attention, it "supports, interprets, and gives meaning to all experiences" of the person. In special states of mind, this orientation can temporarily fade or disintegrate and become non-functional. Sleep is the best example of this. "Any state," Shor defines, "in which the generalized reality-orientation has faded to relatively nonfunctional unawareness may be termed a trance state." By this definition, workshop and group participants are often in a state of trance.

The destructive aspects of such a state of consciousness are well known from the frenzies of mass hysteria, mob behaviors, and impulsive crime. In trance the habitual patterns of thinking are not in force and the person can experience reality in a completely different way. What was regarded as 'impossible' becomes possible: superhuman feats are even possible. Arnold Ludwig (4) states, "...the distinctions between cause and effect may vanish, the notion of time may become more relative, opposites can co-exist and not seem contradictory... A type of 'perceptual cognitive restructuring' tends to occur in which the individual has available new avenues of experiences and expression." Thus, the person in trance is highly suggestible and is capable of very creative behavior, constructive as well as destructive.

In controlled experiments (5) subjects in trance have reported experiencing changes in perception, a sense of unreality, a melting into their surroundings, blank-mindedness, a loss of control, disconnection from parts of their bodies and other strange sensations. Also they reported feeling happy, powerful, feeling like a different person, being fascinated with certain thoughts, and feeling under the control of others.

Trance states can be induced in innumerable ways other than through hypnosis, some quite unexpected.

For example, in 1787 in Lancashire, a woman put a mouse down the neck of a female colleague in a cotton factory. The victim was terrified of mice and entered a trance of violent convulsions lasting twenty-four hours. The next day three more women were in a similar state. By the fourth day twenty-four persons, including a man who exhausted himself restraining the others, were similarly affected. Accompanied by a rumor that cotton poisoning was the cause, the malady spread to nearby factories. The cotton workers, as is the case today with certain difficult "mental diseases," were electrically shocked out of their fits.

Many such epidemics followed the Crusades and the Black Death in Europe. The lower Rhine country in 1374 was the scene of violent religious frenzy. Many were afflicted, dancing for hours until falling exhausted. Some declared that they felt "as if bathed in blood." Attempted cures served only to encourage the spread of contagion. One inmate of a nunnery reportedly entered trance in which she would bite her companions. Another nun mewed like a cat. These symptoms spread to other convents. (6)

Trance can be induced by isolation from routine daily life (7); fatigue (8); emotional tension (9); fasting (10); ambiguity and confusion (11); boredom (12); listening to music, singing and dancing (13); public confessions of feeling (14); being engaged in artistic creation, meditation, prayer, or long vigils such as highway driving or sentry duty (15); as well as from intimate contact with people, the ingestion of alcohol, caffeine, and other mind altering chemicals. All of these factors, to some extent, are present in workshops and intensive group meetings.

The form of trance and the personal abilities that may be enhanced varies with the individual, the setting, the induction technique, and the expectations of the culture and the social group. For example, the hypnotist who suggests relaxation and emphasizes sleepiness induces a sleep-like trance. Walking on hot coals, piercing the flesh without bleeding, oil-painting in the style of dead masters are manifestations of trance nurtured by certain situations.

By learning how to control the trance's destructive potentialities while utilizing its creativity some human groupings have benefited greatly. Ancient Greeks, for example, were able to deal with stress as well as heal through trance. By abandoning themselves to the sounds of flutes and drumming, dancing until they collapsed, they not only induced healing trances but



also removed their destructive aspects. Aristotle, according to Robert Graves (16), realized that before morbid affections could be expelled, they might first have to be artificially stimulated.

Inducing trauma to reverse its affects was also discovered in world war II. William Sargant (17) obtained relief for shell-shocked soldiers by administering drugs to the victim and, in the resulting trance, suggesting he relive the episode which had led to the breakdown. It was soon discovered that superior results could be obtained by provoking emotions of fear and anger, not from the actual but, from imaginary events. For example, a patient who had broken down in a tank battle was given the suggestion that he had to fight his way out of a burning tank. Outbursts of fear and rage led to emotional collapse, followed by dramatic relief of nervous symptoms. These might include making "gross and unco-ordinated, yet regular jerking and writhing movements... temporary loss of speech or a stammer, or perhaps an explosive form of talking." Dull and listless stupors, memory loss, fainting attacks, severe tremors, and loss of limb use were symptoms also reported. Little was reportedly gained by having a melancholic patient weep, however.

Perhaps significant learning always involves breaking habitual patterns of thought. Psychoanalysis and many psychotherapies attempt to restructure the patient's reality through suggestions made during trance. One of Freud's patients (18) recalls "For the first few months I was able to feel nothing but increasing anxiety, humiliation and guilt. Nothing about my past life seemed satisfactory anymore, and all my old ideas about myself seem to be contradicted. When I got into a completely hopeless state, he then seemed to start to restore my confidence in myself, and to piece everything together in a new setting."

Any type of interview — such as conducted by psychotherapists, police, or journalists — which causes the person to concentrate attention on his or her life history, justifying behavior, motivation, values, and so forth, can induce trance. Often innocent persons, vulnerable to suggestion, have produced confessions they perceived the interviewer to be fishing for.

In the spring of 1897 Freud discovered the unfortunate fact that, not all but, most of his patients' childhood seductions had never happened. Having built his theory of hysteria on these cases, he was shaken by the understanding of the force of his suggestions, "... the result at first was hopeless bewilderment. Analysis had led by the right path back to these sexual traumas, and yet they were not true. Reality was lost from under one's feet." (19)

One of the most important uses of trance has been in providing leadership and wisdom to communities. Oracles served this

function for many centuries prior to the Christian era. Delphi was for over a thousand years, according to Plato (20), the "interpreter of religion to mankind."

Suppliants would ask the priestess at the temple of Apollo at Delphi for predictions of the future after which, according to Arnold Ludwig (21), "Pythia would mutter some magical words while inhaling fumes emanating from poppy leaves or hempen ingredients. She would then fall into a 'hypnotic' trance during which Apollo wrestled with her, but she finally succumbed to his power. Awakening from trance, she would utter the famous oracles, known for their ambiguity and *double entendres*."

The Delphic oracle is said to have specified the site for what is now Istanbul and other colonies, denoted friendly nations, judged the abilities of rulers, the fairness of laws, and the best trade routes, as well as explaining plagues and other crises.

The Old Testament records that prophets utilized trance states. There were those who had dreams and revealed them (Jeremiah, 23-28), those who hallucinated — the Lord spoke to Samuel (1 Samuel 3), an Angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon (Judges 6-12) — and those who were otherwise possessed by the spirit of God. Elijah, Jephthah, and Samson displayed extraordinary physical and mental feats with the "spirit of the Lord upon them." The prophet was receptive to trance and the "spirit of the Lord came upon him mightily," "took him," "drove him," "fell upon him," "moved him," "caught him away," "set him on his feet," and sometimes "the hand of the Lord was upon him."

Some prophets may have also used chemical aids to enter trance and be possessed. Nevertheless, they also carried immeasurable burdens of responsibility, providing wise and effective leadership for the nation. For example, "Moses brought their cause before the Lord; always enveloping himself in fumes before giving utterance. And it came to pass when Moses entered into the tent the pillar of cloud descended and stood at the door of the tent. And the Lord spake with Moses. . . . And the Lord spake unto Moses face to face as a man speaketh unto his friend." (numbers, 11-25).

Trance has had a well-known role in religious conversions and in the promotion of social movements. In Northampton, Massachusetts, in the winter of 1735 Jonathon Edward's preaching inaugurated what came to be known as the "Great Awakening" religious revival in North America. From small meetings with dramatic conversions word got around that unusual things were happening. Great crowds eager for socializing and excitement, eventually overflowed the capacities of small communities and the camp meetings were born.

William McGreedy (22), pastor of Muddy

River church in Logan County, Kentucky, described the trance induced at such meetings. "No person seemed to wish to go home — hunger and sleep seemed to affect nobody — eternal things were the vast concern. . . . A very great number of people of every age, I believe from 10 years to 70, were struck down. . . they fell in the camps, on their way home, and after they got there."

Falling to the ground, jerking, dancing, and even barking like a dog were common manifestations of trance. Some felt no warning symptoms but suddenly fell, as if shot dead, remembering nothing until they recovered. On awakening, some delivered passionate sermons which influenced many. Some, according to one observer, spoke for five hours without ceasing, part of the time so loudly that "they could be heard at a distance of a mile." (23)

The mass religious movements of Europe in this period, particularly those surrounding John Wesley's preaching, have been seen as primarily serving to advance social and political forms. Frederick Davenport (24) claims that the "very gathering of masses of men with a common purpose was an unconscious sympathy with the drift of the age. Its like had never been known before in England. The fundamental democratic right of assembly was not yet evolved." People falling in trance in mass meetings did not serve the church so much as democracy. "The mass meeting, the platform speech, the political pamphlet freely and widely distributed — these were the very organs of public opinion in the democratic movement, and they were in large measure the outgrowth of the revival."

Trance may have been utilized indirectly in the development of democratic society but it has been used directly in revolutionary movements. History records many instances of a herd instinct being released in mass outbursts of violence resulting in the overthrow of one authority or the other. (Karl Marx even justified this as part of the wisdom of the species.)

Deliberate attempts to use trance to alter perception and control thought are found in the various programs of brainwashing of political prisoners. In Korea, for example, Chinese captors employed fatigue, rewards and punishments, alienation, distrust, information control, restructuring of reality, attacks on beliefs, forced participation in activities, group discussions, repetition, self-criticism and public confessions in order to break the prisoner's conditioning and implant their own suggestions. (25)

Of course, not only Chinese communists employ such techniques. The American Federal Prisoner's Coalition (26) filed a petition in 1972 with the UN Economic and Social Council. The prisoners claimed that the Asklepion program of the Federal Penitentiary in Marion, Illinois, was using thought reform methods. A comparison was



published which showed the prison program identical with Chinese communist brainwashing methods.

Trance can be used to manipulate the minds of people. Whether it is destructive or constructive depends on one's point of view. In the absence of methods of discipline the trance can be destructive to the individual and the community. Under the guidance of a person with knowledge of such phenomena, the trance can become effective. Many traditional systems with African ancestry have accumulated knowledge of trance states. Through the tradition the extraordinary powers of the medium — the person in trance — are harnessed to provide guidance to the community, help deal with stress, to heal, to promote individual awareness, and to advance the social order of the community.

The self-evident wisdom spoken by the medium in trance, the advice, prophecies, speaking an impenetrable or foreign language, and healing abilities are mentioned most frequently as paranormal faculties associated with this state. The traditional system, however, serves a much deeper purpose than that of novelty or even medicine. Maya Deren (28), from her studies of Voudoun in Haiti, describes it as a "religion of major stature, rare poetic vision and artistic expression," containing a constellation of grand archetypes.

In trance the medium may manifest the state of *Ghede*, life which is eternally present; *Ogoun*, the warrior hero; *Erzulie*, goddess of love, a few of the many archetypes which constitute a "system of mental and emotional convictions upon which the very survival of the community is dependent." (29) The participant learns love and beauty from the "presence and person of *Erzulie*, experiences the ways of power in the diverse aspects of *Ogoun*, becomes familiar with the implications of death in the attitudes of *Ghede*." The person emerges with a "strengthened and refreshed sense of his relationship to cosmic, social, and personal elements" of life.

Moreover, the trance is used for purposes which transcend individuality. Maya Deren writes, "It is as if the mind, by-passing the particularities of circumstances, the limitations and imprecisions of the senses, arrived, by paths of metaphysical reason, at some common principled truth of the matter. . . . To worship the *loa* 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." (30)

*Person-Centered Workshops* — The workshops contain many of the conditions previously mentioned which induce trance and under these conditions participants are doubtless highly suggestible. Other factors add to this suggestibility. The fact that the organizers will not assume authoritarian

leadership may increase suggestibility. Jerome Frank (31), speaking of evocative therapies, observes, "The therapist's steadfast refusal to assume active leadership tends to create an ambiguous situation for the patient, who has only a vague idea of what he is supposed to do, how long he is to keep it up, and how he will know when he is finished. . . . The resulting unclarity may enhance (the therapist's) influencing power. . . (as) a person in an ambiguous situation is impelled to try to clarify it. . . . To the extent that a 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."

*Workshops Differ From Coercive Programs* — Workshops do contain methods and conditions which have also been applied by those intent on manipulating the thoughts and behavior of others. In the workshop, however, no manipulative techniques are intentionally used. Participants, for example, are not required to review or re-interpret their past life, to make confessions, or even participate in meetings or other activities, though they often do. Whatever is known to be influencing the participant's experience is revealed to him or her. Sensory deprivation, isolation, torture, drugs are not employed by the organizers, nor sanctioned by them.

There are correctives, in the workshop, to the influences of the trance induced by belonging to such a group. The person who deviates from the majority opinion has allies. People in the group defend one another's rights to be different, to participate or not, in their own way, at their own pace, to remain silent, even to withdraw.

Moreover, no attempt is made to make the environment hostile or threatening. In fact, the organizers attempt to establish a "safe" environment, a quiet setting where the person will be comfortable and not feel physically in danger. This, unfortunately, tends to encourage the acceptance of the organizer's goals, stated and unstated. But the corrective for this is the open attitude of criticism towards all aspects of the workshop, its organizers, and its organization. Also, the convenors themselves do not remain aloof. They join in the situation that is being lived by participants. Whatever happens to participants happens to organizers. They participate in the same trance, subject to the same inductions and suggestions.

In the workshop a cult of individualism is always a danger. There is sometimes a notion of "becoming all that you can become" or becoming the "person of the future." there are also paradoxical suggestions which perhaps enhance trance induction: "be yourself," or "be spontaneous," or "be autonomous." Goals such as these are eventually exposed and discussed from the point of view of the underlying motives of the individual and the group in adopting

such beliefs. The orientation of the group is continually revised by the group itself.

Totalist language, writes Robert Lifton (32), "is repetitiously centered on all-encompassing jargon, prematurely abstract, highly categorical, relentlessly judging, and to anyone but its most devoted advocates, deadly dull. . . ." Jargon is brought from the outside culture and also initiated in the workshop group. The long, tiring, emotion-filled meetings and other conditions which induce trance make the participants susceptible to slogans and repetitious ideas but the constant challenge to the relevance of words and beliefs reduces their effectiveness. Jargon is exaggerated and made fun of. Participants laugh at themselves and their most prize inventions, when these inventions become oppressive or meaningless. Love and laughter are said to be able to break every conditioning. Pavlov's dogs did not even retain their learned habits, barking excitedly in the presence of their beloved master. (33)

In Chinese thought reform projects, in religious cults, in "training seminars," and many other activities aimed at changing attitudes, the participants are obliged to confess in public and to undergo indoctrination in new habits. The relief subsequently felt is often taken as a sign of "growth," "change," or "spirituality." Follow-up meetings to reinforce the conditioning such as "advanced seminars" or "support groups" are installed after the large group intensive experience.

John Wesley (34) assembled converts, following his dramatic preaching, into groups of twelve to meet weekly and discuss difficulties and continue their indoctrination with a group leader. If such "support groups" following an intensive experience tend to reinforce conditionings which clash with the home environment or if they erect a mileau around the person which binds him or her to an ideological movement, are they not the enemy of intelligent self-discovery? Seen in this light, following an intense experience it seems more unethical to provide "support groups" than not to.

Robert Lifton (35) has distinguished the various approaches to changing human behavior and attitudes: Coercion commands: "You must change and become what we tell you to become — or else." The exhortive approach preaches: "You should change — if you are a moral man — and become what we (in the name of a higher authority) tell you to become." The therapeutic approach coaches: "You can change — from your sickly state, and find relief from your suffering — if you have a genuine urge to be healthy; and if you are willing to follow my (or our) method and guidance." Realization states: "You can change — in such a fashion that you will be able to express more fully your own potential — if you are willing to confront yourself with ideas and approaches



which challenge your present ways of knowing and acting." Workshop groups, at their best, arrive at the approach of realization.

It is not the purpose of this paper to denounce or root out trance states, as they evidently collaborate with creativity. Some conditions, such as ambiguity, apparently contribute to a trance state and at the same time prevent the suggestion that participants produce whatever is demanded by the organizers, implicitly or explicitly. (36) The group participants can utilize the creative potentiality of trance without being manipulated. The purpose here is to sketch conditions which induce trance, its possibilities, some of its dangers and foolishness, and how groups might become more often constructive and not destructive.

**Creative State** — Workshop groups do, occasionally, become wise and effective entities. Though the organizers may play a key role in convening such a group, neither they nor others in the group legislate, through programmed interventions, the creative state. This is a condition in which the group functions coherently, effectively, with wisdom and efficiency, accommodating every voice, both sensible and delinquent, not compromising, and initiating only intelligent actions which are just, growth-promoting, or healing for the individual and the community.

As soon as its preparatory tasks are accomplished, the staff relinquishes its institutionalized power. No leaders are elected, appointed, or otherwise designated. But they do emerge. If organization is needed, one skilled in organizing comes forward; if technical knowledge is required, a person with expertise appears; if someone is needed who can sharply express a certain emotion or thought that others only vaguely sense; the person who can provide a fact, a significant insight, information, at the right moment, becomes the leader. It is as Xenophon described his comrades, ten thousand leaderless Greek soldiers, who made their way safely from Persia back to Greece. Drawing on individual intelligence and initiative each one was a leader, "free individuals unified by a spontaneous service to the common life." (37)

The creative state is accompanied by what are usually regarded as contradictory aspects held concurrently in the group and eventually within the same person. One aspect may be called *autonomy*. The person is capable of self-governance, independent thought and action, and expressing his or her unique thoughts, opinions, beliefs, and perceptions in reacting to the group. The person can maintain a separate identity, experiencing his or her values and feelings and thoughts in a larger context than merely the present moment. If the group enthusiasm is moving toward injustice, the person interrupts, will not take part in it, and tries to influence the group to a just action. This would express autonomy.

Somewhat paradoxically the person is able to live fully in the moment, abandoning pride, a sense of personal significance, to yield to something which transcends himself or herself. This aspect is called *humility*. It allows the person to yield to the creative prospects of the trance, to relax the critical faculties, to surrender opinions, convictions, perceptions to those which are superior in inching the group toward a just outcome for both individual and collective. It allows the mind to bypass "the particularities of circumstances, the limitations and imprecisions of the senses," to arrive at "some common principled truth of the matter." This humility allows a voluntary submission to the group's reality, and the willingness to be changed. The person can surrender impatience and easy answers for an attentive waiting — alert to follow or to lead or to remain still. Those able to put forward their best solution for an important problem and then relinquish their idea, doctrine, belief, perception for one superior would be expressing a convergence of autonomy and humility which is present in the creative state.

Autonomy, with its isolated, personal viewpoint, helps challenge stock premises and dogma, and protects against the development of "true believers." It continually challenges the fundamental values that the community lives by. Objectives and processes of the group are relentlessly examined. Typically this is not done with bitterness or to impede progress, but to bring the best of individual intelligence to bear on the sensible functioning of the group.

**Summary and Conclusion** — People often think and act differently in groups than they would in isolation. Committing themselves to belong to a group, experiencing emotional tension, listening to music, dancing, becoming fatigued, fasting, being bored, confronting ambiguous and confusing situations, and other actions which intensify and concentrate the attention on sensory stimuli, excluding other stimuli, induce a state of *trance* — a state of consciousness in which the ordinary reality orientation fades and the critical faculties are subdued.

In trance reality may be reconstituted. The impossible is now possible. But the same convergence of thoughts, feelings, behavior, the oneness, can be both constructive and destructive. Intoxicated by their unfamiliar reality participants may become cultists, political fanatics, or enthusiasts in a destructive herd. Group participants may think, "This cannot happen to me. I am not in a trance. I cannot be affected so easily as primitive or uneducated people." But this apparently is not the case.

On the other hand, in the new reality *dividuals* can become *individuals* — scattered personalities can congeal into a concentrated consciousness. Participants can connect, as yet, unconnected thoughts, can find surprising insights to complex issues,

can act in brilliantly creative ways which benefit the private person and the community.

A *creative state* is the name given to this condition wherein the *group* can intelligently coordinate its activities without plans, legislation, or parliamentary procedures in a sensible process which involves and respects each person; the group culture can transform itself to accommodate its own changing realities.

Participants in a creative group seem to possess both *autonomy* and *humility*, whose functions are described by William James as the "normal self is not excluded from conscious participation," but the "initiative seems to come from elsewhere." Autonomy and humility characterize one consciousness of the individual (and the group). They are two sides of the same coin: the person can be vigorously expressive, lucid, autonomous and function in a spontaneous congruence, diffused with an intelligent and effective collective of persons. The conjunction is more than either face. It does not obey the private or the universal. Contrary to conventional expectation, its autonomy functions for unity of the whole; its humility functions for individual growth.

Good will, acceptance and trust are also part of the provocation for wise and effective groups. These are not ends in themselves. They are functional. Their role, as it may have been in religion originally, is as technical prerequisites to the transformation of group consciousness, not to anchor morality or a belief system.

Groups seem to have always been able to provide the means for altering the human consciousness to reduce stress, facilitate self-realization, make intelligent decisions, serve religious and social functions, facilitate perceptual and social changes, and to guide and instruct the community from sources of knowledge which transcend the private person. In traditional systems humility and autonomy were represented, as M. J. Field (38) observed, in "a curious blend of gainfully directed hysteria and patient self-discipline." The fulfillment of individuality was harmonized with the transcendence of individuality as "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." (39)

This perhaps is not different today in our groupings. Groups hold the *possibility* to confront and inventively solve the very perplexing problems which they often provoke. Perhaps workshop groups are part of the beginnings of a "tradition" to deal with the patterns of consciousness in modern collectives.

*Excerpted from a paper of the same title. Readers who wish to obtain a copy with references, please write the editors.*