

# THERAPEUTIC COMMUNITIES IN RETROSPECT

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From an early age I was interested in social networks. At school this merely amounted to being sociable, but in organized school sports great emphasis was placed on team games played in competition with other Scottish schools. To achieve the distinction of playing on the top team, say at rugby football, was at least as important as achieving academic success. I came to realize that team morale was as important as athletic prowess when it came to winning games and I soon gained a reputation as a leader who recognized the importance of social organization as well as physical fitness and skill.

With the exception of medical school, which I hated—we were passive victims of an authoritarian regime—life has been kind, and I have had one long series of medical/psychiatric posts, which allowed freedom to evolve and grow in flexible social organizations (Jones, 1953). This led to the formation in 1947 of the first therapeutic community at Belmont Hospital—renamed Henderson Hospital—in London, which is now in its thirty-ninth year. Since that time I have been associated with numerous therapeutic communities in the United States, Scotland, and various parts of the world as a consultant.

## THE PROCESS OF SOCIAL LEARNING

As the relevance of a therapeutic community to social organizations in general has become increasingly clear, it has become better to think of such communities as examples of more generic social systems (Capra, 1982). The term *democratic system*, rather than therapeutic community, gets away from the

idea of "treatment" and implies a more universal, changeable, and dynamic process. Not only is it appropriate to explore the relevance of these principles to most, if not all, social institutions, but it is also appropriate to think of them in more global terms.

The distillate of my thinking over a period of four decades includes some basic concepts. First and foremost, I see the whole theory of therapeutic communities as stemming from interpersonal relationships. Our individual identities can be seen as a reflection of how we imagine our environment sees us and, in a sense, we create our own environment. In this context, our responses—whether verbal or nonverbal, correct or incorrect—imply that we are all, in one sense, a part of a changing group matrix influenced by and responsible to each other.

Differing levels of consciousness will be discussed later in this article. Here I am making the assumption that our focus is on group or community interaction to bring about change, thus I am ignoring the possibilities of contemplation and meditation as an individual phenomenon (Trungpa, 1969). There is also the implication that psychotherapy as a formal two-person interaction is not utilized. However, the various psychotherapeutic skills that staff have acquired in previous training inevitably affect the quality of even casual contact with individual clients. The same applies to the personality and character traits of the staff and of the clients as a whole.

Group interaction inevitably involves individual interaction within the group matrix, which at times may amount to a two-person relationship, but even so it is the dynamic affecting the whole group that is seen as of primary importance. Obviously a group cannot exist within a vacuum and this is particularly true in a residential community. The social forces associated with the process of living, the culture of the community at any one time, and the social organization involved are all part of a process of change affecting the community as well as the

individual members.

A factor that was largely overlooked in our early work was that of levels of consciousness. We tended to take events and happenings at a factual level even though we were well aware of Freudian emphasis on unconscious determinants of behavior. Concepts like guilt inevitably obtruded but were dealt with circumstantially, having been absorbed into the culture of the therapeutic community.

Almost from the start of our therapeutic community at Henderson Hospital we were aware of forces in the environment that eluded our ability to conceptualize, but made us aware that we probably had only a superficial understanding of the underlying factors in the process of change. As an example, Carl Jung's idea of a universal unconscious was never discussed as far as I can remember. Our concept of reality was based on what we were aware of through our senses and was limited by the factors of time and space. Intuition and the paranormal were of beginning interest (Jones, 1982), but our focus was still essentially in objectively observable phenomena. It was only after I left direct involvement in clinical work in therapeutic communities, in 1982, that I was free to follow the process of change in the wider dimensions of consciousness—including creativity, synergism, synchronicity, and mysticism. This inevitably led to a growing interest in Oriental philosophy and religion. However, in our therapeutic community practice we contented ourselves with a very simplistic attitude toward change, as manifested by our awareness of group process. We talked of "social learning," or learning as a social process. It was assumed that by listening to the group discussion, every member was comparing his or her attitudes, values, or beliefs with everyone else's, and in the process modifying his or her original position by incorporating divergent views of others when these were sufficiently persuasive. In other words, a motivated and interested group member was inevitably modifying his or her "mental set" as the group pro-

cess proceeded. The tendency was for the group to coalesce in some form of consensus. Thus, the culture of the group was in a constant state of flux, mainly as a result of the daily community meetings.

This group process of "social learning" was distinct from what we usually mean by the word *teaching*, where the teacher expects the pupils to passively and uncritically absorb what he or she is lecturing about. This information-gathering forms a major factor in our current school system and is obviously important, but social learning through dialogue and interaction is largely overlooked. This was a major factor in the process of growth and change in our therapeutic community. Nor did we focus on a planned use of emotional group pressure to achieve a predetermined goal through some form of conditioning and behavior modification. We saw process as more important than any specific goal. Process was the transformation occurring as a result of group interaction.

The fact that we were "treating" a resident population meant that similar environmental influences were experienced by everyone, but in ways difficult to assess. The deliberate application of an "open" social system with a democratic rather than a hierarchical authority structure meant many differing individual reactions and was particularly stressful for the more passive, dependent members who felt a need for firm control from some higher authority. The daily demonstration of the practice of shared decision-making in meetings of the entire community meant that social learning could be invoked to achieve a form of group identity that lessened feelings of vulnerability and isolation and at the same time enhanced the opportunity for individual growth and change.

This evolutionary process applies to any group of people who are highly motivated and seek to become more aware of their latent potential, both individually and as a group. Such process groups are usually conceptualized in relation to some definitive goal in mental health, industry, education, or any

other positive social group (Argyris, 1970; Whitely, 1984; Jones and Stanford, 1973). But such groups may be self-defeating if exclusively goal-centered instead of being open to social learning. The goal may become more important than the process. Thus individual needs or current interpersonal problems of the group may be by-passed in favor of the ultimate goal.

Social learning indicates a change in an individual's attitude and/or beliefs as a result of group interaction. These changes are incorporated and modify the individual's personality and self-image. Social learning is a process that is undefinable and involves many factors, which will enter into many different combinations and permutations according to circumstance. It is significantly different from teaching that is one-way communication between teacher and pupil (Jones, 1976 and 1982). This is seen every day in most school classrooms where the subject being taught—English, mathematics, and so on—excludes any study of the manifest thought content in the group. But, you will say, a class is not an interactional or social learning group unless it bears on a more abstract subject like social studies. Even then, there will usually be a prescribed curriculum aimed almost exclusively at supplying information for an ultimate class examination. Moreover, teachers are meant to teach and not to involve themselves in intercurrent problems. This, to me, is the difference between the pursuit of knowledge and the pursuit of personal growth, or social learning.

A dramatic illustration of this happened to me recently when a university professor, despairing of his self-image as reflected to him by his class, asked me to attend his class in the role of a facilitator. A facilitator is not a group member, but ideally is invited by everyone concerned to help them to help themselves. He or she should have group skills but is limited to reflective comment and stops short of active inputs to the group. The facilitator strives to remain objective and retain the trust of

everyone.

The professor had prepared the class of thirty undergraduate students for my visit and they had agreed to my presence. He then proceeded to lecture and I soon sensed the resentment in the class. His performance from my perspective was overly goal-centered; and while he tried to be entertaining—cracking jokes, and so on—he did not interact with the class or pick up numerous individual nonverbal communications. So I began to comment on some of these nonverbal communications. I addressed the teacher with “I think the young woman in the front row was trying to say something to you.” The ensuing discussion between the professor, various students and myself amounted to process, which temporarily interrupted the goal of the lecture. A dialogue developed in relation to the differing perceptions and reactions expressed, and this had the effect of unifying the group, lessening the social distance between teacher and pupils, and so tending to humanize the professor in the eyes of the pupils.

I was present at three two-hour classes with this particular group and helped them to adopt an interactional pattern in the class with the willing concurrence of the professor. In addition, the social organization of the class changed considerably. The professor left his place on the podium and joined in a newly formed circle where eye contact was easily achieved and spontaneous interaction encouraged. So the traditional formal teaching style was enhanced by a beginning pattern of social learning. At the end of term, the students were asked to evaluate the professor’s class. Many students reported a dramatic change in the social climate of the class and a greatly improved image of the professor himself. Obviously there was a wide range of reaction, but this was the general trend. This was reflected in the response of the professor, who when I met him after reading his students’ reports, was quite ecstatic. He vowed to repeat the process a year later with other classes, which in fact he did with very similar results.

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## LEVELS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

When a highly motivated study group or therapeutic group has been meeting regularly for some months or years and a high level of trust has been achieved, some or all of the members may become aware of changes in their ideas or perspective that have no apparent relationship to the conscious group process. In other words, the process of social learning may not be explainable in rational conceptual terms, and changes in individuals, or in the group in general, have happened for no apparent reason. Up to now in this article, our focus has been largely on conscious understandable interactions, but few people would deny the existence of other intangible factors. This introduces the idea of levels of consciousness including the well-established psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious, which is too well-documented to need any further mention here.

There is a growing awareness that our Western idea of consciousness is far too limited, being based on our ego needs and a concept of "reality" limited to objective phenomena that can be studied "scientifically." However, the recent interest in Eastern philosophy and meditation combined with the physicists' new subatomic theory and its link with mysticism has introduced a new attention to levels of consciousness that we are only vaguely aware of and that defy "accurate" description (Capra, 1982). This new "reality" cannot be studied objectively but few people doubt the existence of a world beyond self-awareness, a world of mystery that has links with both conventional religion and the Eastern philosophies.

Harman and Rheingold (1984) have collected examples of some of the world's greatest creative geniuses—including mathematicians, poets, composers, and so on—whose work came to them from beyond the threshold of consciousness in trance-like states or dreams. Among these are Poincaré, Wagner, Mozart, Kipling, Shelley, Keats, and many more.

Harmon and Rheingold go on to stress the importance of “inspired writings,” such as the Bible, the Koran, the Torah, and the Veda, which are alleged to be inspired and written through, rather than by, the writer concerned. Arthur Deikman (1982) states that language is developed to deal with objects and that we lack words to deal with our inner awareness. Motivation usually applies to material needs, but a higher level of consciousness is available to everyone who seeks self-understanding. This can lead to doing something for its own sake rather than serving only material self-interest.

The term *synergism* has come into use to describe the process by which some group “happenings” seem to defy logical reasoning. It is as though the group has, at times, become more than the sum of its parts, the individual members. Many people are content to see this phenomenon as evidence of unconscious mental mechanisms at work and follow a psychoanalytic path to understand them further.

Carl Jung broke away from Freud’s reductive psychoanalytic theories and introduced the possibility of a more mystical explanation. Jung coined the word *synchronicity*, which suggests that concepts such as luck, change, and coincidence may be linked with archetypes and what he described as the universal unconscious (Odajuyk, 1972). Instead of seeing the flow of events as inevitably a matter of cause and effect, he sees the possibility of a universal pattern or universal archetypes, which may explain why we sometimes experience the most extraordinary coincidences that we are at a loss to explain. He felt that all people have some inherent qualities in common, which he called archetypes. These archetypes have historical depth, linking us with our “primitive” past—our fear of thunder, our need to believe in an all-powerful God, the wise old man, and so on. Such phenomena are common in everyday life and bring together conscious, unconscious, and emotional factors. Thus, in many cultures the image of the wise old man assumes archetypal proportions, and his utterances are assumed to be



profound and are given a deep significance without the necessity of being critically examined. Jean Bolen (1984), a Jungian analyst, has applied the idea of archetypes to the mythology of the Greek goddesses with a view to enhancing our knowledge of the psychology of present day women.

Carl Jung developed the idea of a collective unconscious. To quote from Jean Bolen (1979), "Jung maintained that the collective unconscious or the archetypal layer of the unconscious (two terms for the same phenomenon) was involved in synchronistic events." While Jung agreed with Freud that we each have a personal unconscious that owes its existence to personal experience and contains whatever is forgotten or repressed, he also described a deeper layer of the unconscious, which he called the collective unconscious and which he considered universal and "inborn."

## EXPANDING COGNITIVE BOUNDARIES

This raises the possibility that everyone has latent potential that is kept outside of consciousness by our preoccupation with a narrow concept of reality and our need for rational thinking. Up to now, this tendency has obscured our awareness of our more intuitive and spiritual legacy. We see this phenomenon best in young children, with their rich fantasy life, symbolic paintings, belief in fairy tales, and blurred reality boundaries. This potential is soon lost by exposure to "education," which breeds conformity. In this context a growing number of people are abandoning rigid reductive "scientific" methods in favor of more "mystical" possibilities, believing that "exact" answers dear to the reductive scientific mind, ignore much recent work in the field of Eastern mysticism, parapsychology, subatomic theory, and other aspects of physical science. This is often referred to as New Age thinking and goes back to the beginning of the century or even earlier.

In 1905, Albert Einstein published his special theory of relativity which superseded, in part, Newton's 300-year-old scientific reductivism (Einstein and Infeld, 1938). It was the beginning of an age when speculation and experimentation without "proof" were becoming respectable. The word *paradigm* became popular and stood for a concept that might or might not have validity but lacked proof. With the splitting of the atom in physics and the study of subatomic particles, it became clear that in this realm the old Newtonian laws governing experiments in physics no longer applied in all cases. Further, the reductive scientific proof that physicists had previously relied on now no longer applied to subatomic particles. This meant that serious workers now had to be content with probabilities or paradigms. These have the advantage that they were always available for further study and modification.

Our schooling in reductive scientific thinking had led us to believe that in order to understand something we must have a picture of it in our heads. But recent studies in subatomic theory seem to have changed this comfortable concept of reality. No one has ever seen an atom, and the smallest object visible under a microscope contains millions of atoms. The word *quantum* simply means a quantity of something, and the study of these invisible particles has to be done indirectly by studying some of the properties of these quanta. This procedure is now called quantum mechanics. For those of us who lack a training in physics, we must take these findings on trust, knowing that the researchers are dealing with probabilities and not provable facts. This amounts to saying that our simple faith in a visible objective reality is no longer valid in all circumstances. Newton's laws depict events that are simple to understand and easy to picture. Quantum mechanics is concerned with the probabilities of phenomena that defy conceptualization and are impossible to visualize (Zukav, 1979).

In recent years, the whole field of parapsychology and the supernatural has become the subject of serious study and the

boundaries of what we previously understood as reality have changed. A new paradigm of reality is emerging and includes much of the Eastern philosophies and subatomic theory as well as a new interest in the religions of the world and a spiritual reawakening. Mathew Fox (1983), a Dominican scholar, has much to say in this area. A well-known physicist, Fritz Capra (1975), has written a book about this global spiritual revolution linking it with his work as a physicist. He has written another book about the changes occurring in our Western society, our scientific beliefs, and our perceptions, values, and cultures (Capra, 1982). He points out that our preoccupation with technology and atomic resources as an end to the current world crisis is bound to fail unless we begin to conceptualize the world as an interdependent global system. *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, another invaluable resource book in this new holistic field, covers much of the same ground (Ferguson, 1980).

I have barely touched on the extent to which holistic thinking is changing the safer, more predictable, world that many of us knew in our student days, when reductive reasoning was the cornerstone of our education. Even now most of our schools and universities still cling to this Newtonian scientific vision of reality.

This New Age thinking seems to have had little, if any, impact on psychiatry, where despite a waning interest in psychoanalysis, Freud's theories of psychodynamic factors are still believed to explain human behavior, guilt, conflict, and so on, in an essentially reductive scientific way. Alternatively, a strictly scientific approach to mental illness sees its underlying causes as biological, genetic, or chemical, which increasing technological skills will ultimately explain.

This contrasts sharply with the view adopted by therapeutic communities based on systems theory, social learning, and social change. Here the individual comes to identify himself with the living group of his peers, the therapeutic group of which he is a member, and the community meeting involving all patients

and staff. In other words, treatment, or social change, is centered on the quality of the relationships and the social and cultural forces in the environment. It must be emphasized that this approach to treatment and social change does not necessarily exclude the more usual methods of treatment practiced by most psychiatrists, which are used sparingly and with much circumspection.

These developments have led me to a growing interest in general systems theory, the interdependency of all aspects of the world scene, and the dynamic nature of the universe. Since leaving Scotland and moving to North America, further study has led me to an awareness of the similarities between New Age thinking in physics and the schools of Eastern mysticism—Hinduism, Buddhism, and so on—with their emphasis on the unity of the universe. In particular, a Benedictine monk influenced me through his writings and audio tapes (Griffiths, 1982). His experience in an ashram in southern India—where for thirty years he has striven to integrate the Christian and Hindu philosophies—has added a new dimension to the meaning of holism and unity in relation to a universal God. Finally, as already pointed out, subatomic theory has demonstrated the limitations of our concrete image of reality.

## GLOBAL RESPONSIBILITY

It is in this context that I believe the therapeutic community has played a small but important part in the process of change toward the new paradigm of reality. Those of us who worked with the early therapeutic communities represented an approach based on systems theory with dedicated groups of people meeting regularly for long periods of time and evolving toward a high trust level. At that point, we occasionally became aware of group processes that we were unable to explain. This synergism amounted to more than could be accounted for by

individual inputs and interactions. This opened the way to a fresh awareness of intuition and spiritual happenings as part of group process.

In conclusion, I would like to see the approach of learning as a social process introduced into elementary schools at an age when children have not yet lost their capacity for creative imagery in order to widen the scope of traditional teaching based on rational thinking, one-way communication, and periodic examinations. In fact, I have come to believe that every classroom everywhere should adopt an open systems approach (Jones and Stanford, 1973; Glasser, 1969). As a start, with the use of frequent class meetings with a trained facilitator—at least one per week—the process, attitudes, values, and beliefs of our Western society could conceivably change over time. Ideally, this would lead in the direction of social learning, problem solving skills, shared decision-making, and a global perspective. This may be dismissed as absurdly optimistic but there is much evidence to the contrary. Just as some of our cherished beliefs and perceptions of reality are changing as a result of New Age physics, so too are our attitudes toward the abuse of power by the hierarchies in politics, industry, medicine, law, and so on. The consumer is beginning to be heard in many areas by way of the feminist movement and other movements concerned with peace, the environment, water shortages, and solar energy. I find all these developments compatible with systems theory and, in turn, with therapeutic communities as I have come to understand them.

If we agree that our Western culture and our technological advances have brought us to the brink of the destruction of the entire world, then it would seem that our hope for survival lies with this kind of counterculture touched on here. But can we change from our self-centered ideas of elitism, power, and competition to think instead of our responsibilities to one another on a global scale?

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