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GROUP THERAPY
FOR BODY, MIND AND SPIRIT
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The following is a model for a two and a quarter hour, weekly psychotherapy group with bi-yearly day long or weekend retreats. I have worked this way with three year long general psychotherapy groups and with an ongoing men's group.

Introduction

As the field of psychotherapy moves into the twenty first century, there is a greater awareness that all the dimensions of our lives are inextricably inter-related. It is becoming increasingly impossible to simply treat someone psychologically without also taking into account their physical and spiritual well being. Like the eastern proverb of the blind men each describing different parts of an elephant and believing they were touching different creatures, we are coming to the common sense realization that as practitioners specializing in one area of healing or another, we all have our hands on the same animal. All the systems of a human being exist as a functional unity. Furthermore, developing scientific paradigms indicate that change at any level has reverberations, many of which are as yet unseen or untrackable, that echo in some small way from the cellular to the cosmic levels in a great chain of being. Perhaps if our sensitivities were developed highly enough we would realize that we are touching life itself every time we make an intervention as a healer. (1)

Common sense tells us that the larger the system the greater its' potential energy and effect. Some systems interact with other systems to provide a container in which the smaller system can grow and be nurtured, other systems interact with each other along common denominators or shared boundaries while other systems look relatively closed and self

contained. For most systems, form follows function. In other words, the way that a system looks and operates is usually dictated by its purpose. Without a purpose all the energy that is in a system has nowhere to go. If we apply this principal to a psychotherapy group, it naturally follows that a) there will be lots of energy available in a group to accomplish the task of therapy and b) that the clearer we are about what the elements of this task are, the easier it will be to accomplish.

As I've already implied above, my personal definition of therapy is a holistic one which includes body, mind and spirit. By bringing the great potential energy of a group to bear on many different levels of our being at once my intention is to create a synergy which will have the most profound impact. Although I have applied this model in its entirety only with groups, I use exactly the same principals with couples and individuals, and theoretically they apply to families and to even larger groups such as political systems and nations. In System theory this is called the principal of isomorphy.(2)

The foundation for this work has been the Systems Centered Theory and Practice which I have been learning over the past four years with Dr.Yvonne Agazarian. Within this basic framework, which I have been using as a kind of 'meta-theory', I have explicitly included practices from various meditative traditions, Body Oriented Psychotherapy, movement modalities and Spiritual Psychology. In so doing I have made explicit certain principals that I believe are already implicit in Systems Centered Therapy.

As a Body Oriented Psychotherapist who has also spent a significant portion of my life involved with spiritual practice and in various types of spiritual communities, I have been very excited to integrate Systems Centered thinking into the other disciplines and approaches I have been using. There was such an immediate resonance with other forms that I felt as if a light had been switched on and a whole library of experiences suddenly fell into place. To be sure, it is not that I don't notice some very important differences between this approach and others, all of which need close and careful attention, it is simply that the similarities in basic principals far outweigh those differences. I also can see possibilities for a cross fertilization that can greatly enhance the effectiveness of a variety of disciplines. One of my hopes for this article is that it can seed discussion amongst and between practitioners of many disciplines which in turn can perhaps help to further refine our potential for helping others, and ourselves to heal and mature.

I would also like to note that all of the disciplines mentioned here are complex and sophisticated reflections on the

human predicament and as such my understanding and practice of their principals and techniques is continually evolving.

Therefore, like all models of this kind, this is a work in progress, and must necessarily be incomplete and subject to revision.

Basic Principals

To start, I think that it is useful to note the similarities in the principals which Systems Centered Therapy, Body Oriented Psychotherapy, a variety of movement modalities, meditation and Spiritual Psychology use to organize and work with human experience. After these essential organizing principals and common values have been established, I will also note some of the important differences and 'hot issues' of contention which I see between these disciplines.

First, the similarities. To begin with, all of these disciplines place a fundamental importance on a state of mind, which, though they call it by different names, is phenomenologically the same. This is the experience of being 'here and now', fully 'behind one's eyes' with all of one's energy available to work (Systems Centered Therapy), (3) 'Presence' (Spiritual Psychology), (4) 'mindfulness' or being in one's 'center' (various forms of meditation), (5) and being fully 'in one's body' exquisitely aware of the ebbs and flows of the life force and the 'functional unity' of the body/mind (Body Oriented Psychotherapy and a variety of movement modalities).(6)

Second, all of these disciplines emphasize process, i.e. exploring or apprehending the unfoldment of experience, as opposed to explaining, interpreting or analyzing experience.

Third, all of these disciplines have a notion of a core, spontaneous or authentic self or soul which exists inside of each one of us and which can be lived through skillful means. This self is usually conceived of as an evolving process which has no fixed or static existence in and of itself. In some schools of Spiritual Psychology one speaks of an 'essence'(7) that has no content. In the meditative tradition of Buddhism there is the concept of 'emptiness' or 'no-self',(8) which essentially points out the paradoxical nature of our being as an empty vessel, which will ultimately dissolve into the formlessness of 'all that is', and that is filled with everything and yet has no inherent substance of

it's own. Systems Centered Therapy talks about a 'spontaneous self'(9) which points more to a spontaneously evolving 'event' more than anything else. Finally, in Body Oriented Psychotherapy and many movement traditions which have roots in humanistic psychology and philosophy one hears a lot of talk about 'authenticity', 'self-actualization' and 'peak experiences' as hallmarks of a deep inner connection with self.(10)

Fourth, all of these disciplines see that there are forces which restrain us from living in a continuous awareness of our authentically evolving experience as it shifts moment to moment through feelings, sensations, and thoughts. (I know that's a mouthful, but its the best definition I could come up with for the self given the preceding paragraph. For the sake of simplicity, from here on in, I will simply use 'authentic' or 'spontaneous' self.) These restraining forces are called by different names and are approached in different ways, however within these differences there are many overlaps and equivalent terms. Briefly, a list of some of the ways these disciplines talk about these restraining forces is as follows. In Systems Centered Therapy, Reichian therapy, Bioenergetics and a variety of analytically oriented therapies, these obstacles are generally discussed under the heading of 'defenses'. In Spiritual Psychology and many meditative traditions practitioners often speak about 'patterns of reactivity', 'sub-personalities', the forces of 'attachment and aversion', and illusion, fear, desire, anger, ignorance, and laziness. These last six are particularly problematic when they are either acted out or repressed rather than investigated with mindfulness and insight. In many forms of Body Oriented Psychotherapy which have grown out of a Reichian tradition there is the notion of 'psycho-physical character armor' in which split-off or dissociated emotions are held at an organismic level. The notion of psycho-somatic tension and disease has also gained wide acceptance across many fields as an important way in which we fall out of harmony with ourselves. In Systems Centered Therapy there are 'cognitive defenses' in which one creates a secondary reality based on fear (and then lives in it as if it were real), "affective defenses' in which one either 'acts in' or 'acts out' a feeling rather than containing and exploring it, and 'somatic defenses' in which an affect becomes so bound in physical tension, aches and pains that one is blinded to the experiential feeling that was the origin of all this suffering in the first place. Systems Centered Therapy also

talks about role-locks around authority and intimacy, projective identifications, and 'barrier experiences' in which one has taken a piece of information so 'personally' that no real communication is possible.

Fifth, all of these disciplines have observed that there is a developmental order and somewhat predictable, if non-linear and spiraling, creative intention inherent in this process. In other words, once we have learned the skills to organize our experience in such a way that we are living in 'apprehensive' and 'exploratory' reality with 'mindful presence' as opposed to our 'comprehensive' secondary 'explanations' and 'interpretations' of that reality, certain specific shifts occur in the way in which we experience ourselves and the world.(11) Thus there is some kind of developmental map of inner and outer events that we can observe phenomenologically. The job of the group leader, therapist, facilitator, or spiritual teacher is to help people stay in this process exploring the edge of their experience as it unfolds moment to moment, to weaken the various restraining forces to this natural process, and to create an optimal environment for experiential growth and learning to take place along this continuum. The paradox here is that by very definition this exploratory stance must elude explanation or any attempt at interpretation in terms of these developmental maps during the time when someone is in an experience. If a practitioner attempts to explain or interpret at this time it will almost immediately bring the individual or group out of their experience and become a restraining force relative to the task at hand.

Managing the boundary between our desires to comprehend and make meaning of our experience and learning how to apprehend and explore our experience is always a difficult task, which different disciplines have managed in different ways. Most forms of therapy and spiritual practice attempt some kind of skillful interweaving of these two forms of knowing by developing an artful sense of timing and 'pacing' during the session. Systems Centered Therapy is unique in that it deliberately splits the cognitive and experiential aspects of our experience by having a separate time set aside for "surprises, learning's, satisfactions and dissatisfactions and questions". Regardless of how a facilitator or group leader manages this boundary, it is abundantly clear that the greater facility, experience and understanding the guide or practitioner has of these processes of

development and the various models which our most sophisticated researchers and theoreticians have come up with, the general sequences and patterns of these models, and the principals which underlay them, the better he or she will be able to contain, deepen and direct the work.

Hot Issues and 'Choice Points'

Now, for the differences. The first and most obvious difference between these approaches concerns their philosophical underpinnings and views on the question of how we make ultimate meaning of our existence. Systems Centered Therapy takes no position in this regard and attempts to take a purely phenomenological approach to the study of human experience. In so doing, Yvonne Agazarian has left these philosophical questions open and has chosen simply to provide a methodology and language by which the experience of human systems may be accurately described and the defenses which inhibit optimal functioning and energetic vitality, analyzed, modified and worked with to a productive end. However, central to Systems Centered Therapy are several principals which are deeply resonant with many schools of spiritual inquiry, particularly those of Buddhism, Taoism and the esoteric schools of Sufism and western Alchemy. These are the principals of centering, process, the union and integration of opposites, the primacy of experience as a way of knowing, and that our existence is held inside of some larger context or system which has a certain lawfulness and order to it. Hopefully, at some later point I will be able to develop these ideas and the ramifications of them more fully.

Spiritual Psychology and the meditative/contemplative approaches to human experience are obviously squarely in the camp that the ultimate reality is spiritual and that it is the spiritual destiny of each human being and of humanity as a whole that gives the struggle to grow, become aware, and to take responsibility, meaning and importance. The Bioenergetic (not Core Energetic, however) schools and some Reichians are far more ambivalent about discussing any questions of 'ultimate meaning' and tend to see most forms of spirituality as a defense against struggling with the finite existential reality of our bodies. Movement modalities such as Authentic Movement and Improvisation seem noncommittal on questions of ultimate meaning although many practitioners of these

disciplines come out of a depth-oriented, Jungian tradition and are certainly sympathetic to a spiritual world view. Body oriented disciplines that support making meaning through a spiritual world view are most forms of Breath work, Core Energetics, and those movement disciplines that come out of a Taoist, Buddhist, Shamanic, Sufi, or Western Esoteric tradition.

Second, these disciplines differ in how they work with the various obstacles we encounter on the path to the authentic or spontaneous self. These differences seem to fall along six key valences or choice points. 1) Whether to be confrontive or supportive/accepting/reframing in the face of defended experience. 2) Whether to use primarily the matrix of the transference/counter-transference relationship as a vehicle for modifying the restraining forces in our path, or to emphasize the relationship with self and/or spirit. 3) whether to support regression or some other form of inner child work or to steadfastly maintain the framework of the adult ego who is always potentially capable of choosing at the 'forks in the road' that experience presents us with and who has wants and appetites but very few real 'needs'. 4) Whether to intervene with a lens geared primarily towards seeing the systemic nature of experience and behavior, or to emphasize the intrapsychic, individual nature of experience. 5) Whether to support or encourage cathartic discharge or to work with a process of containment, awareness and insight. 6) Whether and how to make use of historical psychodynamic information, our 'stories' and the role given to this information.

To my mind, the above issues are such key 'hot' vortexes of thought and feeling, and have such important practical implications on how one actually intervenes in any given circumstance, that to even begin to discuss in a general way these issues and the different perspectives that each discipline takes is far beyond the scope of this article. Furthermore, even though certain disciplines fall on one side or another of these choice points no clinical situation is ever so tidy and practitioners must constantly be making choices along these valences based on context and theory. Thus, a restraining force in one instance will be a driving force in another and vice versa. All of these issues warrant careful thought and investigation and at a later date hopefully I will be able to develop an in depth discussion of the different elements that go into making these crucial clinical decisions. In terms of the model I am presenting here, in the

following pages the reader will get a fairly good sense of where my tendencies lie.

The choice of intervention strategy in any therapeutic interaction is always complex and multi-dimensional and involves all sorts of conscious well thought out rationales as well as personal preferences, conscious and unconscious transferences and counter-transferences and lies at the heart of any practitioners therapeutic artistry. The more mastery and knowledge the 'therapeutic artist' has over his or her materials and craft, combined with how successfully he or she has been able to engage in the long and arduous process of personal development and the struggle to become aware of his or her character structure and unconscious tendencies and compulsions, the more depthful, containing, colorful, and intuitively sensitive an environment will be created.(12)

The Nitty Gritty

The following is a description of the nuts and bolts of how this integrative model works. In each section I will give an example of how this portion of the group might go, although each session is totally unique and so what follows are simply examples of certain principles. In this section the reader will also get some sense of where I fall in the 'hot issues' of contention between these disciplines.

The Body

I start the group by helping people to become aware of their bodies and the vast instinctual impulse life that rises up spontaneously from our organisms. I do this for several reasons. Firstly, it is this spontaneously arising impulse and imagery life which, when given forms and containers to focus it, becomes the major driving force in our journey to the authentic self. Secondly, as we become conscious of the repressed physical and emotional energy that we hold in muscular tension, restricted breathing, unexpressed vocalizations and movement, and begin to allow this energy to 'stream' through our body mind, we are also making quick and sure steps towards health and well-being. (13) Thirdly, as we tune into and trust the body's wisdom, we are often led into the next level of material for us to integrate. (14) In remembering our primary reality as physical organisms we have an opportunity to let

go of our interpretations and explanations of our existence and to appreciate the unfathomable mystery of who we are and at the 'edge of our unknown'.

This work also helps group members begin the important process of crossing the boundary from their roles outside of group to their roles as group members (15) as well as shifting their focus to an awareness of their inner life. As they leave behind their roles as office workers, therapists, doctors, lawyers or whatever else, their energy moves from one container to another and becomes available for a different kind of work. This type of physical work also helps to build a group energetic field as people meet each other non-verbally and begin to mirror and resonate with each other's physical expressions , vocalizations and breathing patterns.

The exercises which I use in this part of the group come from many traditions. Authentic movement, Bioenergetics, Reichian therapy, Tai Chi and Chi Kung, Breath work, Improvisational Theater and Shamanism are among my favorite sources. The common thread which I emphasize in all of these forms is a mindful awareness of ones energy state and a permission to allow the river of impulse life to unfold in an atmosphere of safety.

By beginning the group in this way I establish a group norm that we will be working with mindful presence, process and energy. Indeed, these are the essential elements which run through all the dimensions of the groups work. I also connect people in an immediate and visceral way with our original mode of communication, which is non-verbal. With any luck this will also help to foster a sense of congruency and integration between all the levels of our communication when we do use words.

As the work progresses I ask each group member to enter into a state of deep receptivity to their inner, organismic life. I ask them to notice the ease or restriction of their breathing , muscular tension or fluidity, the rhythm and textures of their movements, the timbre of their vocalizations and their relationship to the earth. This gives people the opportunity to become aware of their characteristic approaches and attitudes toward life, the unconscious 'postures of the heart' which have become structured into their organisms.(16)

An example of how I lead this part of the group is as follows. I begin with the 'grounding exercise' from Bioenergetics to help

people become alive in the energetic current that moves through their legs. (17) While people are hanging over with their hands lightly touching the ground and their knees slightly bent, I ask them to breathe deeply with their mouths open and their jaws loose. I ask them to imagine all the collected stress of the day pouring out the tops of their heads and landing in a big heap at their feet. After a couple of minutes people may feel a vibration beginning in their legs as the life force which has been bound in tense muscles begins to release. I consistently encourage spontaneous vocalizations and sounds. Often I will take this opportunity (with each group member's permission) to massage peoples' occipital muscles in the back of their neck to help them let go of the obsessive mental control that can get armored into these muscles. As group members come out of the grounding position (slowly, one vertebrate at a time, leaving their heads for last) they are already in a very different state of consciousness than when they entered the room. I ask them to stop and to notice what they are experiencing. After a minute or so of mindful awareness, I ask them to 'shake', an exercise which involves standing in one spot and literally shaking loose the whole body, breathing deeply and vocalizing. This will help to loosen all the joints and diaphragms of the body. I might also do several other bioenergetic exercises to loosen tension around the pelvis, chest, throat or face. Occasionally people become emotional as they enter into a deep experience of their bodies through these simple exercises. If this occurs I encourage group members to fill up with their feeling and to express their fear by shaking, their joy by laughing, their longing by reaching out their sadness by crying, or their anger by stamping. This will allow the natural pulsation of the body to come back into rhythm. (18) A crucial point to be aware of here, is to notice if group members are actually 'getting rid' of their feelings by discharging and acting them out rather than using these exercises as an opportunity to develop a deeper connection with their primary instinctual energy. Unfortunately, there are no clear guidelines which I can offer in this regard other than to encourage facilitators to have extensive personal experience of these exercises and to have an in depth grasp of the developmental stage and context of each group member. All of these exercises weaken the restraining forces at a physical level to the spontaneously occurring feelings and imagery life which

rises up from our bodies.

After working Bioenergetically for the first ten or fifteen minutes, I move the group into exploring very slow Tai Chi or Chi Kung exercises (19) I direct people to focus on a sense of lightness and buoyancy which they can experience as energy (Chi) starts to flow through their internal organs and meridians. After leading a couple of exercises I might suggest that they continue to move in this slow, mindful manner perhaps even with their eyes closed, allowing their movements to evolve spontaneously in the tradition of improvisational movement. As they listen to and move from this inner river, the qualities of their movements, their breath, and their vocalizations may change dramatically. I ask them to be mindful of all of the dimensions of their experience; their inner imagery, the movement of their bodies in space, as well as what it's like to move here, now, with these people, in this room. Occasionally, if we are spending a longer period moving improvisationally, I might ask people to create a ritual either individually or collectively which somehow expresses the energy with which they are entering the group that evening. I might also give them a simple drum beat or other music to interact with. This type of transitional structure, well timed and well directed can be a powerful way of organizing and cohering the group space.

To end the movement work, I ask people to simply lie on their backs and to breathe deeply, witnessing and marinating in the energy of the experience that they have just participated in.

This section of the group lasts about half an hour.
Succinctly, my goals are:

- 1) To help group members transition out of their every day consciousness and roles into 'sacred space and time', i.e. Here and Now, with centered presence and mindfulness.
- 2) To help group members become aware of the 'functional unity' of the body-mind and the deep cellular wisdom that emanates from the core of our physical being.
- 3) To 'unwind' the body-mind non-verbally and to begin to free up emotional and physical energy bound or repressed in tense, numb, under or overcharged or otherwise blocked areas of the organism.

- 4) To deepen breathing and to expand each persons capacity to experience pleasure and other intense feeling states.
- 5) To bring awareness to the different characterological attitudes which have become structured into the body-mind and which limit the fluid, unitary, and fully alive response of the body-mind to its environment.
- 6) To increase individual and group awareness of spontaneously arising impulse and imagery life.
- 7) To help transition group members into their member roles and to create a state of mind which will most facilitate the group work.
- 8) To increase group awareness of non-verbal communications and interactions and thus to foster a sense of congruence through all the levels of our communication.

Meditation

After working with the body, I move the group into meditation. This phase of group normally lasts about fifteen minutes and is a natural extension of what went before it, often flowing seamlessly out of the 'body work' as the group is already in a heightened state of conscious. During this phase, I encourage the group to become aware of the subtle energetic movements that occur as their awareness shifts to a yet more internal level.

I might ask them to notice how their experience changes when they focus their attention first on themselves, then on a relationship which they have with someone in the group and then on an awareness of the group as whole. I might even expand this and ask people to then focus on the larger social or natural environments of which we are a part encouraging them to imagine these systems within systems as one organism, inter-related and inter-dependent inextricably affecting and being affected by each other at every level. This exercise helps group members to practice the skills of crossing boundaries from one level of focus to another, and subtly teaches people to think in systems centered terms. (20)

Another meditation which I often use, is to ask each member to open up the 'eyes and ears' of his or her heart, and to ask in the most sensitive, compassionate way, 'in this moment, how am I? What is it like to be here, in this room, with these people right now?

what is it like to feel the container of the group, the group 'field of energy' (21) cohere itself?

Groups each have their own history, 'tone' and folklore. During the meditation period, people have the opportunity to connect with this group culture and to rest into this field of awareness. Meditation also affords people an opportunity to seed and focus, often in quite unconscious ways, the group work which is to follow.

This is usually a led meditation period, in which I give the group suggestions and focus, although it may also be simply a period of mindful silence. I try to construct the meditation according to my sense of the groups particular needs that evening.

In many ways, meditation might be thought of as a deeply receptive state in which the portals of the preconscious, the unconscious and the super-conscious are open and suggestible. Therefore, when I give the group images I try to use open ended, non-specific suggestions or visualizations to allow group members to receive those images and feelings which are most pertinent to them in that moment. For instance, one guided visualization might be to suggest that beneath us is a sea teeming with life and that as we open our awareness to these waters, the sea gives us a gift to be examined. I ask them to be exquisitely aware of this gift, of its size, shape and color and perhaps even to dialogue with it. I ask them to also notice the mood and atmosphere of the sea. What is the weather like? This type of guided meditation allows for a great variety of internal responses.

Sometimes I do very specific traditional energetic or philosophical meditations from Taoism, Sufism or Buddhism, three schools that I've had a fair amount of experience with. As always each practitioner has to know his or her own resources as well as what will serve the life of any particular group.

My goals for the meditation period are:

- 1) To invoke a state of 'presence' and 'mindfulness' to all of the dimensions of our experience; physical sensations, breath, emotions, thoughts and intuitions.
- 2) To help group members energetically experience the difference between focusing their attention solely on themselves, on a dyad of themselves and another person, and on the group as a whole, and thus to encourage a way of thinking which is systems centered and will optimize the group process work.

3) To invoke a connection with a 'Source' or energetic context greater than the personality and thereby to provide an atmosphere of compassion and acceptance for repressed, unaccepted, or rejected parts of our life energy and experience.

4) To welcome unintegrated, unfelt, unaccepted or unconscious parts of our experience into consciousness and to begin the process of helping the individual to bring these parts of him or herself across the boundary from their internal world into the group experience. (22)

5) To expand each member's repertoire of healing meditations they can use for their spiritual development and healing.

6) To increase each individual's and the group as a whole's capacity for stillness and the ability to listen to the intuitive voice that speaks to us in silence.

Verbal Group Process

As the group moves into verbal processing, my goals are: to create an environment in which group members can contain and explore (as opposed to act out) their defenses and obstacles to mindful presence, enter into a state of mindful presence and begin to live there, and to create a reality testing environment in which group members can struggle with and explore their 'real' relationships with each other rather than their explanations, interpretations, or otherwise defended experience of those relationships. In a sense, one might frame the group process as an open eyed, interactive, mindfulness meditation. In the context of this portion of the group's work, the inner attention which in meditation is usually brought into a vertical relationship with self and/or Spirit, is given the additional focus of the horizontal dimension of our relationships with each other. To create this environment of mindfulness, my interventions are geared towards 'sealing the container' by helping group members get all of their energy in their bodily felt experience, in the moment, in the room, with each other. (23) As the group container heats up, the energies of the deep, authentic self begin to transform and to 'cook' the space between group members, reshaping and molding it. In a sense, one might say that this space takes on a life of its own, like a good piece of art. My job as the therapeutic artist is

to listen to the creative muse, to catch its ebbs and flows and to guide its energies into forms and structures which are both therapeutically and aesthetically satisfying.

Check ins and distractions (24)

At the beginning of the group process, people may be distracted in various ways and need to 'check in' before they are ready to work in a verbal modality. I ask people to notice if any of their attention is focused somewhere else and to bring first the content of the distraction into the group, and then the feelings that accompany that content. Perhaps a group member is carrying a particularly potent experience from her week that she feels compelled to share with the group. Someone else may have had a particularly powerful experience during the movement or the meditation. Before the group can work effectively with all of their mindfulness and presence available to them, the energy contained in these experiences has to be brought into the relational matrix of the group work. To the extent a group member can then let go of the 'content' of his or her distraction and bring the emotional energy of this material into relationship with the group, a subtle and profound change occurs. The 'outside of group' material is suddenly transformed into a vibrant emotional contact in the room, in the present, and a source of available energy which can fuel the next level of the groups' work. The group can now begin to resonate and 'sub-group' around the feelings without becoming distracted by the 'content', which can easily drain the groups' energy and attention away from the here and now and out of their awareness of the moment to moment shifting of sensations, thoughts and feelings. (See below for a description of the technique of sub-grouping)

In this process of becoming present, here and now, in oneself, in relationship with the group, each individual and the group as a whole is also learning the skill of managing the frustration that occurs whenever we cross a boundary from one experience to another. From the standpoint of Systems Centered Therapy one might conceptualize all of the groups work, indeed all of the developmental stages of life, as a process of managing the conflict which we feel whenever we cross a boundary in time, (from the past or future into the Now) space, (from outside of the actual space one is in, into the Here)

reality (out of fantasy into our phenomenologically observable experience) or role (out of whatever role we were in, into the role that is appropriate for the task at hand). In the role of group facilitator, by consulting to these boundaries and teaching group members how to skillfully negotiate them, I am in a sense, conducting a dress rehearsal for life. (A 'real life' example of the principal of role boundaries in a family happens when one person is a parent, a lover, and a bread earner, and a daughter, each of which requires a different kind of energy and focus to accomplish a different task.) By teaching group members how to negotiate the relatively safer and easier boundary crossings involved in the groups' work, I am building a library of experiences that can be of enormous benefit in 'real life'. In group as in life, we inevitably have to mourn the loss of the old and familiar and face the fear, excitement and curiosity of the new as we cross each boundary.

The Group as a Whole and the Self of the Group

In both Systems Centered Psychotherapy and Spiritual Psychology there is the notion of the group as a system in which each member plays a specific role which is both personally rooted in his or her psychological history and impersonal in the sense of containing a charge for the group as a whole or the 'Self' of the group. These roles and the dynamics surrounding them appear and reappear with great consistency in groups. Many practitioners and theorists have observed how group members volunteer themselves for specific roles based on their personal histories and psychodynamics. Hopefully, if the groups' work is facilitated well group members will be afforded the opportunity to grow beyond their repetition compulsions and experience their next developmental step. In this form of conscious group work, one might say that the collective presence and attention of group members fertilizes an archetypal process of growth and individuation. Although this process of individuation is spiraling and non-linear, it has definite stages which have been conceptualized by many theorists in many ways. In working with a group I have found it useful to keep in the back of my awareness the developmental models of Object Relations, Self psychology, Bioenergetics, Spiritual Psychology and especially, Systems Centered Therapy. Each of these models

deserves prolonged and careful study. Because the Systems Centered model is so directly applicable and based in group experience, I have included it in an appendix. Obviously, the more subtle and complex the facilitators' understanding of these developmental stages and a variety of theoretical perspectives about them the more he or she will be able to contain and deepen the groups' work.

From a spiritual perspective, one might think of the group process as a laser beam of energy, fully available in the moment enlivening a seed which is just waiting to sprout and take root. This consciousness focalizes the Self or 'Soul' of the group. The Self might be conceptualized as an organizing principle which guides and coheres the fabric of the group's life and can hold all the polarities of the group's experience simultaneously, or at the next step below it systemically, the individual's experience. As such, the Self is everywhere and nowhere. (26) Using the principal of isomorphy or the model of a hologram, one can note that as the group does the hard work of differentiation, recognizing splits and projective identifications and integrating them, so each individual group member also has the opportunity to mature and develop a more integrated container for the energies of the Self.

Sub-Groups and Sub-Personalities

In the language of Psychosynthesis (a school of Spiritual Psychology) one might imagine that each time one enters group one is entering a room filled with one's 'sub-personalities'. (27) Each group member is in a specific portion of the human experience with which one has different levels of resonance. At any given moment, people in the room may be identified with feelings of grief, rage, joy, sensuality, or even paranoia. Indeed, in this type of group work, the larger the group, the more it provides a variety of mirrors and fields of resonance to join with, the more interesting is the work. It is the task of the group facilitator (as it is the task of the therapist in individual work), to create a field in which all of the aspects of the Self (i.e. sub-personalities) can be worked with constructively. (See 'A Functional Definition of Constructive Group Work' below.)

In Systems Centered Therapy, the group process proceeds by

working in 'functional sub-groups'. (28) Functional sub-groups join around their feelings and experience rather than around stereotyped labels such as black or white, straight or gay, Republican or Democrat, etc. Sub-groups can be thought of as an extension of the sub-personality work of Psychosynthesis at the level of a group. In sub-group work, when someone feels a resonance with a particular experience that a group member is exploring, they join that member with their own experience. The deeper more heartfelt and present that joining is, the more rapidly the sub-group work proceeds. Inevitably, as one polarity of an issue is deepened and explored the other side will begin to surface in the group. Technically, it is also important to note that though this way of working is called a 'sub-group', at no point does the group actually break down into separate spaces. Indeed this would only encourage a splitting and fragmentation of the energies of the Self which contains all of these polarities simultaneously.

The structure of the sub-group work relieves individual group members of the tension and conflict of attempting to work both sides of an issue at the same time which often dead-ends in an unsatisfying experience of ambivalently sitting on the fence with neither side of oneself explored in any depth. Although, potentially we always have both sides of any issue available to us, we can only effectively explore one side at a time. This deliberate and conscious use of the universal phenomena of 'splitting' is unique to Systems Centered Therapy, and I have adopted it because it seems to allow for a much deeper, more differentiated and solid experience of integration later on in the group. With the group as a whole containing the ambivalence, individual members are free to choose to explore the side of themselves that they can learn the most from, or for which they feel the most emotional charge and curiosity. (29)

As the work within a sub-group deepens there is a profound and subtle mirroring of fragmented or dissociated pieces of the self which quite spontaneously and beautifully emerge into consciousness to be experienced and integrated. When both sides of an issue have been explored in their 'differentness' there may also emerge an experience of the similarities in the two polarities and the experience of the integration of these polarities in the group as a whole. This process of recognizing and integrating differences, is, according to Systems Centered thinking, the primary principal through which we learn and grow. (30) There may even emerge a sub-

group which holds both sides, without ambivalence, at a deep, instinctive level of Being. As the work progresses one might say that the group and its individual members are in the process of developing a larger and more coherent container for the energies of the Self. Working in sub-groups also allows group members to explore repressed, dark or destructive impulses without acting them out hurtfully on each other. This process parallels the Taoist principle of yin and yang, various traditions of spiritual alchemy, and Tibetan or Native American mandalas in which many polarities are held together in a single integrative symbol.

The following is a hypothetical transcript of a group working using the 'sub-group' structure. This type of dialogue might occur in a group that has been meeting for some time and thus is moderately skilled at noticing the shifting field of feelings, sensations and thoughts that moves through the individual and group levels of their experience.

Joe: "I am aware of this hollow, empty feeling in the center of my chest. Almost as if someone could knock on it and there would be an echo, like an old tin drum."

Facilitator: "Are you aware of an emotion that accompanies these sensations?"

Joe: Pausing and closing his eyes for a moment. "Sadness. Like I've lost something that's important to me and I don't even know what it is."

Cynthia: "I'm feeling some resonance with you right now, Joe. My sadness feels like a kind of drooping around my eyes and mouth and I have this ache in the pit of my stomach. I also have this intense longing to be stroked and pet, kind of like a big puppy dog. I keep on looking for someone to do that, but there's no-one there."

Fac: See what happens as the two of you maintain eye contact. I wonder if anyone else here is also feeling a resonance with this 'sad' sub-group?"

Mary: "I have this image of a large black coffin. I'm in it all alone. It's cold and I'm crying. It's very dark and silent."

Fac: "Does this image have a bodily sensation which accompanies it?"

Mary: "Yes it does. Right now my whole body feels insubstantial, burnt out. Like the slightest wind could blow me away."

Fac: "And what's it like to make eye contact with Joe and Cynthia

right now?"

Mary: Pausing for a moment and really taking Joe and Cynthia in. "Good, like maybe I don't have to be so alone with this. Like maybe there's someone out there who understands this experience."

Cynthia: To Mary- "I guess I'm not really sure that I'm resonating with you. My sadness feel much warmer, even soothing and comforting, your image is so cold and uninviting. I actually feel rather attached to my sadness."

Fac: "So it seems that there are several different experiences of sadness which this subgroup is containing. I wonder if you can maintain contact with each others similarities while you are also noticing your differences?"

Joe: To Mary - "I actually feel a lot of resonance with you. I also feel very cold and hollow. But my sadness is mixed with a lot of numbness. I'm actually a little envious that there is so much feeling in you. I wish that my tears were more available to me."

Mary is obviously moved, and they have a moment of feelingful eye contact during which Mary wells up with tears.

John: "I think I'm also in this sub-group, but definitely more on the warm side. I've been sitting here containing this big, warm feeling in the center of my chest, my throat is also all tight and I feel like I'm on the verge of crying."

Fac: "As you contain and fill up with these sensations and feelings see if you notice any more information or experience arising in you."

John: "I see this child; no, I am this child, and I'm being rocked by this big, earth mother type figure who's just cooing and humming. It's like its finally safe for me to let out all this sadness I'm carrying". John takes a few deep breaths and begins to cry with his head down.

Fac: After a moment. "It's a beautiful image John, and there's obviously so much feeling in it for you. I'm wondering if you can bring this feeling to the folk in the room that are resonating with you right now?"

John: Slowly lifting his head and making eye contact with Joe, Mary and Cynthia. "I almost forgot about you guys. And you're real. This is a biggie for me. It feels so good to finally get to these feelings and bring them into the group."

Cynthia: "That was great. I feel like the puppy inside of me got right into those big mama's arms with you. "

Fac: "And what's your contact with John like right now?"

Cynthia: "It feels great. Totally unguarded. I feel all dark and warm in my belly. I'm still a little sad but the ache is gone. My breathing is a lot deeper and more relaxed as well."

Fac: "I think that it's important for this sub-group to recognize that it is containing two very different experiences of sadness right now. One that has warmth and comfort, and another that is cold and alone. It might also be important to notice the tension of trying to hold both experiences at once." (As the facilitator I was noticing the pairing that was happening between John and Cynthia and Mary and Joe.)

Cynthia: After a pause "I guess I don't know if I'm still in this sub-group, right now. I'm not feeling particularly sad anymore."

Fac: "Maybe for the moment, you've completed that piece of work."

Cynthia: "I think so. There's a whole new energy coming in right now. I think I need to sit with this some more before I'm ready to explore it".

Fac: "Good."

The group continues to explore this experience of sadness and emptiness for the next ten minutes or so, with different members joining as they feel a resonance. At some point there is a lull and the group process moves into an exploration of anger and rage against authority. This can be a difficult and technically challenging issue to facilitate so I thought an example of how I might work this using this method might be instructive.

Sue: "I just need to jump in here. I've been sitting with this very irritable feeling for the past ten minutes and I want to know if I'm the only one containing this feeling for the group?"

Peter: "I'm so relieved you said that. If this melancholy went on for even another second I thought I was going to burst. My solar plexus is so filled with energy right now I can hardly stand it."

Fac: "Slow it down Pete. Can you bring all of your attention to bear on your solar plexus? Careful now, take all the time you need."

Peter takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly.

Fac: "It might help you to contain all of this energy if you sit up straight so your diaphragm isn't all scrunched up and put both feet flat on the floor."

Peter does this and looks a little relieved.

Peter: "I am in so much rage right now. I never had the right to express my sadness as a kid. All I ever heard was 'Stop your whining or I'll really give you something to cry about.'

Sometimes my father would give me a nice hard whack in the face, too. I hate that bastard."

Fac: "So right now all of that is an explanation for what your feeling and it would be real easy to go into all sorts of interpretations from that. Instead of taking that route you might come back to exploring your feelings in the moment, and see if there is a rageful sub-group here."

Peter: "You and your rules! Explore don't explain. Find your sub-group! Right now I could easily turn my anger towards you."

Fac: "You could, and we might even be able to do a fruitful investigation there. However exploring your rage with an authority figure is hard work and you might not want to do it alone."

Peter: "Of course you're right. It would be really great to have some allies this time around. Is there anyone else here who's resonating with this right now?"

Sue: "I'm right there with you, Pete. While he was talking I was just getting so angry."

Fac: "Where are you feeling that anger right now, in your body?"

Sue: "I've got this big ball of fire in my belly right now which goes right up to the bottom of my ribs and then stops. I've also got this flashing energy going in my hands and I'm getting this very vivid image of strangling someone."

Fac: "See what happens if you make eye contact with Peter right now. Anyone in particular that your strangling?"

Sue: "Yeah, you. In fact now I'm getting this image of your eye balls popping out of your head as you gasp for air."

Fac: "And what's happening in the tight spot underneath your diaphragm as you say this?"

Sue: "It's loosening and actually really pleasurable. I'm getting this little electric thrill humming through my body as this energy gets released."

Peter: "I'm feeling really connected to you now, Sue. I'm having

this image of smashing his head back against the wall and seeing this bloody stain all over his nice white office wall."

Fac: "And what's happening in your body as you say that, Pete?"

Peter: "I'm getting this buzz in my hands and feet and my breathing is a lot deeper. My jaw is also starting to relax for the first time this evening."

Phil: "I want to join here. For the last couple of minutes I've been having this sadistic fantasy of taking all the sad, empty people and locking them in a big iron cage so that they would be quarantined. Then I want to do all these sadistic experiments to them, like I am some kind of concentration camp commandant, dissecting their brains or giving them lobotomies."

Fac: "And what's that like to have the sad part of yourself quarantined in a concentration camp?"

Phil: "Great. I feel really powerful and totally safe. Only I'm not yet aware of this as 'the sad part of myself'"

Fac: "And what are your sensations as you say this?"

Phil: "I feel very hot and huge. Like I'm ten feet tall. And I'm getting these little electrical shocks underneath my diaphragm."

At this point Mary is looking visibly concerned and pipes in with a lot of worry and fear in her voice: "I don't know if I can tolerate this kind of cruelty in the room. I'm having fantasies of running out of here just as quick as my feet can carry me."

Fac: "Mary, I wonder if you are taking Phil's image personally?"

Mary: "I think I am. I felt like he was going to put me in that cage. I just had this instinctive 'flight' reaction in my body."

Fac: "So are you afraid that the sadism will somehow get acted out in the room, rather than be contained and explored?"

Mary: "I guess so."

Fac: "Has this ever happened before in here, with this group?"

Mary: "Well, no. But it has happened to me in my life before."

Fac: "Yes, of course. Probably all of us have experienced sadism getting acted out on us somewhere, either in our families or peer groups or at school. I know that none of us want to recreate an environment in which we get re-traumatized in any way. Do you think that in this group here, that we have the skills and the discipline to contain and explore our feelings rather than act them out?"

Mary: "I think that we do. But I just know how volatile these feelings can be."

Fac: "Of course. So I'm wondering if you and the group as a whole can be watchful with me and call any instances where it seems that something is getting acted out rather than contained and explored."

Mary: "That would feel great. My whole body is starting to relax now. I know that I also have those sadistic impulses in me somewhere. I just got a little flipped out by them this evening. I guess I'm just not ready to deal with them yet."

Fac: "That's a very important realization. I'm wondering if you feel safe enough for the angry/sadistic sub-group to continue it's work?"

Mary: "I do."

Throughout the sub-group work it is extremely important that sub-group members stay in touch with each other through eye contact and energetic resonance and not act out across subgroup boundaries. This is particularly true when the group is working with anger, but it can be equally true for any dimension that the group might explore. In this way the group learns to 'fill up' with feeling states and avoids the trap of scapegoating or targeting any one member. As the group is learning this rather complex skill, and particularly when it is working with issues around authority, group members often need an object to practice on. I ask them to use me in this role, trusting that my skill and objectivity will help me not to take a group member's work personally. (31) The danger for me of course is not being able to maintain my clarity and then contracting my consciousness, and becoming tense or paranoid. If this happens I almost immediately becomes relatively dysfunctional as a facilitator. For this reason it is extremely important to have mastered a certain level of counter-transferential material and to be in ongoing, counter-transference oriented supervision if one is attempting to do this type of group facilitation.

By teaching the group members how to work in a sub-group, how to join around the impulse to target and blame rather than the targeting behavior itself, and how not to take other members work personally, some very potent and difficult material can be explored. When the energy is contained and explored within a sub-group and not discharged in tantrums, depressions, or other forms

of affective acting out, (see 'Some (more) Specific Techniques From Systems Centered Therapy') group members have the opportunity to integrate the material which is coming up without re-traumatizing themselves. As this material is contained and explored it naturally goes through a process of transformation. As spontaneously occurring feeling states are followed all the way down to the bottom dissociated energy is reintegrated into the body/mind of each individual and, in a sense, into the body/mind of the group, allowing systems transformation to take place on all levels.

For instance, if we pay close attention to the impulse of rage without acting it out or in (by getting depressed) we may experience a pleasant, even joyful 'buzz' and sense of readiness that streams throughout our torso and limbs. This energy, once it gets fully detached from its object, may even transform itself into a deeply protective and erotic feeling of self-love which might be experienced as an electric thrill running from the genitals right through the solar plexus and the crown. If we pay close attention to certain types of sadness we may experience a softening in the chest and a watery fluid feeling in our limbs. Over time there may emerge in the group a deep experience of the primary libidinal life force which holds many polarities at once without ambivalence. If the group gets to this point, or a sub-group does, there is usually tremendous energy, contact, and a palpable sense of our instinctual and spontaneous 'beingness' in the room.

A Functional Definition of Constructive Group Work; Containing And Working With Stereotypical Roles (32)

In ordinary life, groups, as well as families and couples, most often act out their powerful primary impulses and emotions by containing them in stereotypical roles such as the victim, the bully, the savior, or the hero. In doing this, the group gets to stuff certain impulses into certain people and then the rest of the group doesn't have to deal with those impulses. As long as these impulses are safely contained within those people who have the most salience for them there is little motivation to reintegrate these split off parts of the self. A functional definition of constructive group work is that the facilitator frustrates to the best of his or her ability the attempts of the group to polarize,

act out or project these impulses into one or several members and then scapegoat or idealize them. One can easily extrapolate the tremendous social and political implications of this principal. Once these impulses are freed from their containing roles the facilitator must also help group members not to bind these feelings into psychosomatic tension, cognitive defenses, or affective acting out. (See 'Some (more) Specific Techniques from Systems Centered Therapy'.) The path which leads to maturation and integration is to explore and experience the feelings that have been bound up in these fairly universal group behaviors and tendencies. The hypothesis here is that it is very difficult for anyone to let go of some of these very stubborn identifications until they have 'bottomed out' on the emotional experience which they have been managing through these roles. By definition the function of a defense is to help us not to experience a particularly painful affect because it was intolerable or because to experience it would have been would have been detrimental to our viability as a developing organism. Before we can let go of any defense we must come to know in a bone deep way the cost of the defense in terms of our aliveness and vitality. We must also experience the emotion that we were defending ourselves against and have

the experience that we are in no way endangered by experiencing those feelings. In fact, quite to the contrary, if the group work is going well, we find that we have plenty of company in our subgroup.

Working with the Defenses to Primary Experience, the Yin and the Yang of it.

Helping a group, or an individual to stay in him or herself, in the now, observing the shifting field of sensations, feelings, thoughts, and intuitions that occur at the intra and inter-personal dimensions, is never an easy task. As a Tai Chi practitioner and dancer I am constantly aware of the complexity of the energetic field that I am engaged in whenever I work with a group. Perhaps because of the physical training that I have had, I literally feel this dance of energies in my body as I guide the group process. As in the 'push hands' exercises of Tai Chi or contact improvisation, I am aware of keeping all of my senses alive to the subtlest

intentions of my 'partners', sometimes supporting their weight, sometimes pushing forcefully and deliberately shaping the space between us, sometimes mirroring with exquisite exactness, sometimes allowing myself to be moved and swayed like seaweed being pushed by the currents of an ocean, and sometimes standing firm like a mountain. Throughout the work I try to maintain an awareness of my 'roots', my center of psychological and physical gravity, and a clarity about my communications on all levels. In facilitating a group, as in dancing or Tai Chi, there is a Yin and a Yang to it, as well as many techniques and skills that one has to practice. As in any art form, there are an infinite number of nuances and subtleties that take a lifetime to master. Many of the basics of this type of group work have already been covered. What follows are some additional ground rules, skills and techniques which I have found particularly helpful and may prove useful to other practitioners.

The Rules of the Game: Group Process Guidelines

Over the years I have developed a set of group process guidelines which I have tacked to the wall during group. At

the beginning of a new group, whenever a new person enters, and periodically during the course of a group's work I either go over or refer to these guidelines. The list is fairly simple, although the skills involved in mastering the guidelines are quite complex. By having these 'rules of the game' posted, I am creating a frame and context for us to work within. This structure contains and focuses the group energy on its task and creates safety.

Group Guidelines

1) Slow Down, Center, Become Mindful of your Feelings, Sensations and Thoughts.

2) Sit Comfortably with your Feet on the Ground and your Spine Aligned. Breathe!

3) If you are Anxious, Notice if your Thoughts are Generating Fear
- Dare to reality check; undo mind reads, negative predictions and constructed realities. (Cognitive defenses)

4) Listen Deeply to your Body - notice how feelings turn into tension when we don't allow them to come into awareness.

- 5) Make Space, Contain and Fill up with your Primary Energy and Feeling.** Notice the impulse to Discharge irritation, frustration or intense feelings of any sort out in tantrums, outrage, blaming or the giggles or in by becoming depressed and guilty. (Discharge defenses)
- 6) Explore don't Explain your experience**
- 7) Avoid advise giving and interpretations**
- 8) Sub-group.** Look for resonance with other group members and join with your own experience. Once you have committed to a sub-group stay with it
- 9) Welcome the Edge of the Unknown.** It is natural to feel anxious with the unfamiliar, curiosity helps!
- 10) Don't Take Things Personally.** No-one can take responsibility for how a group will react to what one says., however, we must all take responsibility for what we withhold from the group.
- 11) Hold the intensity** - Listen deeply to each other with heart
- 12) Distractions** - Crossing the Boundary into the Group. If you notice yourself going out of the group in time, space, reality or role, bring your distraction in, facts first (simply) and then the feeling.

Although this list is not exhaustive, it provides a very solid foundation on which the group can do its work.

The Forks in the Road; an accent on conscious choice (33)

One of the most useful interventions I have learned from Yvonne Agazarian is a technique called 'the forks in the road.' This technique basically calls group members attention to the choices they are making at each boundary of their experience in terms of time, (are they in the now or is energy leaking into the past or the future) space, (is their energy in the room with each other or somewhere else) reality, (are they collecting real data about their actual environment or are they living in fantasy) and the conflicting aspects of themselves which they are exploring at any moment. This technique asks people to be conscious about these choices and highlights the costs and benefits of going down an old familiar road or living in a defense, and creates an opportunity to come up to the edge of one's unknown and to learn something new. To be sure, it always takes time and hard work for anyone to undo the repetition compulsions they have brought to group life, but if the group's work is going well, members have the opportunity to break new ground in a safe setting and have at least half a chance of

taking their new way of being with them into their lives. In the language of Zen, this technique helps to foster 'beginners mind' and challenges people to live without the familiar frames that limit their experience. Often all that a group member can do is to notice the pull of the repetition and to focus all of his or her energy and discipline on just hanging out at the point of choice. This in itself is a profound experience of the unknown. At a later point, as ones discipline and mindfulness in noticing the pull of the old becomes more powerful and ones experience and mastery in venturing down the 'road less traveled' becomes more ego syntonic the edge of the unknown can unfold itself very quickly and spontaneously, almost as if a certain pressure had been building up inside and a part of the self was just waiting to get attention. There can be tremendous thrill and excitement to this process as one rides a wave of awareness and brings more and more consciousness to one's experience. Physiologically, it is important to note that there is no difference between anxiety and excitement, as both states involve a sense of arousal and heightened awareness. Internally however, as we all know, these two states are separated by an abyss. Perhaps the major subjective difference between these two states is that in anxiety we have lost our curiosity and thus have become frozen in our progress towards mastery. (34)

This stance of hanging out at the edge of the unknown, resisting any premature closure of ones experience, allowing experience to evolve from simple to complex, and relying on images of intuition which rise up spontaneously from one's inner world are the same attitudes which the artist has whenever he or she engages in the creative process. (35) One might hypothesize that this type of group work could foster the development of creativity. Although there has been no research in this area (to my knowledge) it would be a fascinating hypothesis to test out.

In pointing out the forks in the road it is very important to avoid making interpretations and/or giving advise. I have to 'walk my talk'. As a group leader, if I use phenomenological, non-judgmental language, I avoid setting up an authority structure that is based on my idiosyncratic view of where I think any particular group member is in his or her internal life. (36) Authority struggles over this type of intervention are usually only destructive to the group process. Only if it is very clear to both the group member and myself that the path they are taking is

an old road do I give them a gentle nudge in the direction of the new. Ultimately, my goal is to throw each individual and the group as a whole back into the struggle with his or her own authority and the difficult discipline of maintaining contact with their own, constantly evolving, powerful center of physical and psychological gravity. By doing this I am supporting the group and each member in developing greater and greater level of mastery of their internal and external environment. (37)

Presence

One of the most essential things which I learned in studying Spiritual Psychology, is that nothing happens without the quality of Presence. First and foremost, this means that the facilitator must develop his or her own quality of Presence. (38) One can have all the words right and letters as long as one's arm after one's name and yet without this quality, the work will fall flat and transformation will not occur. The conscious and unconscious impact of the energetic field of a practitioner is enormous and provides the container for the group's work. Inevitably, and sometimes tragically, we all act out in subtle or not so subtle ways, our unresolved issues and conflicts with our clients and groups. Our Presence both opens and limits the field of possibilities that a group can explore as we consciously or unconsciously make choices about interventions based on our internal responses to group members (counter-transference) and our own individual histories and character structures. It is not whether we will act out that is the question, simply how, and what the effects will be on the group. For this reason, the spiritual, psychological and physical development and practice which I do is an essential part of my work as a facilitator, therapist and healer. Functionally, one might define Presence as the ability to contain and have access to many conflicting polarities and aspects of the self simultaneously with acceptance and compassion. I would also like to note here that there are many paths up a mountain, and I have certainly seen therapists who have no explicit spiritual orientation or psycho-spiritual disciplines which they practice who are able to communicate extraordinary Presence and sensitivity to the deepest levels of the human predicament. I have also seen instances where the 'spiritual orientation' of the practitioner was operating in the service of un-worked out psychological conflicts and was actually destructive in

many ways. Without going into great depth at this time, suffice it to say that developing the quality of Presence is a crucial and complex area which deserves the most careful and sophisticated attention in the personal and professional development of any therapist or facilitator.

Some (more) Specific Techniques From Systems Centered Therapy

In Systems Centered Therapy there is a very specific sequence in which a facilitator works with the forces which restrain us from having access to our primary experience. This sequence corresponds to the modules of group development which Yvonne Agazarian has uncovered. (see Appendix) These techniques have been invaluable to me in working with groups, couples and individual clients. What follows is a brief exploration of the techniques which correspond to working with the defenses in the first module of group development.

Undoing Constructed Realities: When we create a secondary reality based on fear and then live in it (39)

A colleague of mine once passed on a piece of clinical common sense to me - 'real suffering burns clean, neurotic suffering smokes and stinks'. Over the years I have often contemplated the difference between the unnecessary, self inflicted suffering that goes nowhere, and the necessary, inevitable suffering that we must endure as part of the process of transformation. Helping my clients (and myself!) distinguish between these two types of suffering is surely one of the most important services that I provide as a clinician. A helpful test which I have learned from Yvonne Agazarian to differentiate between these two types of suffering is that unnecessary suffering is never based in real observable data, whereas real suffering is based in phenomenologically observable facts that one has to struggle with and come to terms with.

In the case of anxiety, Systems Centered Therapy has developed some very simple and effective ways to help relieve people of unnecessary fear. The first principle of this work is to notice the absolute and often stunning correlation between what we think and how we feel. One of the beautiful and tragic things about who we are is that we have the capacity to generate very real emotional and physiological states simply by veering our thought in one

direction or another. Without any external stimulus we can easily terrify, arouse, anger, depress or eroticize ourselves.

Following this line of observation, when a group member indicates that they are anxious, the first question to ask them is "Are you thinking something that is making you anxious?" If the person answers yes, there is a very high probability that this thought is a negative prediction about something, or a mind read about what someone else might be thinking about them (usually a judgment or criticism of some sort). If the thought is a negative prediction first it is helpful to identify it as such, and second to ask the person if they believe that they can predict the future. Usually when people stop to think about it, they realize that life is such a multi-dimensional and complex event that it is nearly impossible to predict the future about anything. However there are some instances in which a person will say that they do believe that they can predict the future, in which case it is helpful to gather the data on which the negative prediction is based. If it turns out that both the facilitator and the client agree, that based on the data, there is a high probability of their negative prediction being accurate, one can then help the client move towards problem solving and environmental mastery so that he or she can have the best possible chance of influencing their experience in a direction that would be more satisfying for them, i.e. deal with the 'real' suffering. If there is no way to accurately gather data to predict the event which they are negatively predicting, you can help them to master their present experience by asking them if what they are negatively predicting is happening right now. Once they notice that what they are afraid of is not happening to them in the here and now, the facilitator can help them to hang out at the 'edge of the unknown' (with curiosity), by calling attention to the process by which they are generating unnecessary anxiety with their thoughts. This realization in and of itself can be a tremendous relief, as it gives some-one the possibility of mastering their inner experience by changing the way they are thinking. (This technique is similar to many forms of cognitive therapy as well as a lot of 'new age' therapies that help people to examine the effects of their belief systems on the reality that they are creating.)

Another type of thought that often causes people anxiety in groups (and in life) is 'mind reading', i.e. assuming that one can tell if another person is having thoughts about you (usually

negative judgments or criticisms). If the person is having a mind read, the very simple way to address it is to help the person begin the process of reality testing. Systems Centered Therapy asks people to do this by specifically framing what the mind read is as a question which can be answered by a yes or a no. This will give the person the data, and only the data, that they need to validate or invalidate their mind read. This is often a difficult discipline for people to follow, as members are tempted to either ask vague open ended questions or reply with much more than simply a yes or a no. If the facilitator holds the group or individual to this discipline there is a tremendous opportunity to undo projective identifications and to start the process of re-integrating and struggling with the parts of ourselves that we have split off and given to other people (real suffering in the service of transformation).

If a person is anxious and cannot notice any thoughts which are causing them to become afraid, they may be having bodily sensations or feelings that are making them scared. If this is the case, you can help them to slow down and explore the sensations or feelings they are having in their body by locating and describing them very specifically. Often people will have a negative prediction about their sensations or feelings (such as 'if I let myself feel this I might explode into a thousand pieces'). If this is the case, the facilitator can undo the negative prediction as in the process described above. On the other hand if they are flooding and overwhelmed with sensations and feelings, you can help them to differentiate the mass of feelings and sensations into manageable pieces. This will usually decondition the anxiety as the person comes into contact with and gathers more information about the specific sensations and feelings that are making them anxious. In many ways this is similar to the process one might engage in during mindfulness meditation, with the crucial difference that one is working with open eyes, inter-actively, with another person.

The final cause of anxiety which one frequently encounters is that of our existential confrontation with the unknown, the mystery of sitting at the very crest of one's experience, in beginner's mind, without the slightest idea of what will happen next. Unfortunately, all human beings experience anxiety when confronted with the unknown, and the best we can do is to assure someone that this is normal, and simply ask them if they feel

centered in themselves enough to be curious (perhaps even excited) and open to whatever might unfold in their next moment.

Undoing the Somatic Defenses Against Feeling (40) and the Posture of Containment

The next level of defense that is confronted after one has undone constructed realities, is to work with the ways in which a person binds their feelings in physical tension. This work dovetails beautifully with most of the body-oriented therapy approaches that I am aware of. After someone says that they are tense, the first step is to have them describe, as phenomenologically and factually as they can, where their tension is located and what their experience of it is. The next step is to inform them that tension is a straight jacket that binds and constricts feelings. Next, one asks if that is indeed what they would like to do to their feelings right now (99% of the time people say no). The next step is simply to ask them if they are willing to relax their tension and explore their feelings. As someone relaxes and 'lives into' the area of their body that they have been tensing, it is important that they stay open to what the actual experience is that unfolds, rather than their thoughts and interpretations about it. For example, some-one might say 'Well, the tension is in my pelvis, so I must be clamping down on my sexual feelings.' The reality is that they have no idea yet what the feelings are, and if they maintain a true attitude of openness and inquiry they can only gather information about them by noticing what unfolds from moment to moment, with ruthless honesty and discipline. Often in this process it is necessary for the facilitator to undo the constructed realities (negative predictions and mind reads) about what will happen to them or others around them, if they allow themselves to fully experience the part of themselves they have been binding in tension. It is also extremely helpful if a person adopts a bodily posture which will allow them to fully contain and fill up with their feelings and sensations. This means that the diaphragm should not be collapsed or constricted, shoulders are relaxed, feet are planted firmly on the ground and the person is sitting squarely into their pelvis.

Containing Irritability and Undoing Depression (41)

Systems Centered Therapy has developed a very simple process which often goes a long way in relieving people of depression. As this is often one of the hardest symptoms to deal with, it is extremely useful to have such a tool in one's bag of clinical tricks. Although in my experience, this technique does seem to work better with short term depressions than with long lasting ones (which may indicate that the individual has become 'role locked' into being a victim with all sorts of secondary gains attached to the role) or with those that one suspects may have an organic etiology, it is still extraordinarily useful.

The first step in undoing a depression is to ask the person to remember the last time they can remember not feeling depressed. Once they have remembered this, the practitioner then asks them to remember the first time they noticed that they were depressed. The practitioner can then wonder, with the client, what might have happened in between these two times that might have set off the depression. If an event can be identified, the practitioner can then introduce the idea that perhaps there was a fork in the road between an impulse of retaliation generated by hurt and angry feelings and the depression. If the client accepts this as a possibility, the practitioner can then ask what the feeling was that the client had toward the person or event. Usually this is a feeling of anger, irritability or frustration. The next step is to investigate with the client how this feeling was squelched and then turned into depression. Generally this is a constructed reality of some sort that involves a fear of what might happen to them, their environment, or the people around them if they did feel their feelings. The constructed reality is then undone using the method described earlier. It is also important that the client recognize that the cost of living in the constructed reality is that they become depressed. After this sequence of inner events has been identified, the next step is to help the person contain and fill up with the feeling that they were defending themselves against.

If, as often happens when someone has been depressed for some time, no event or feeling can be identified, the best a practitioner can do is to point out, that for right now, there is no fork in the road, and to wonder if the person notices that something is missing. The person can then ask the client to

continue to look at the context in which his or her depression was generated, and to look for the missing feeling or choice point(s) at which they became depressed. Often if someone has been depressed for some time, the crucial clinical issue is whether or not they can bear the hope that they might be able to find some relief.

Containing Irritability and Undoing Outrages and Tantrums (42)

If the energy of irritability, anger and frustration is not acted in against ourselves in depression, it may be acted out in tantrums or outrages that leave a path of emotional or physical destruction in their wake. This will also lead us away from an opportunity to fill up with the deeper instinctual resources of our being and often leaves us with the double trouble of both being no closer to mastering the situation that was irritating or angering us and having to clean up the havoc the discharge has caused in our lives. When someone discharges the energy of anger in a tantrum or an outburst the rush of energy that is released is usually extremely pleasurable and often gives someone the illusion that 'wow, now I'm really in touch with my anger'. However if we really study the experience of what happens during a discharge of anger there is a buildup of energy in the body that is almost intolerable and that the individual is usually trying desperately to manage. In the frantic rush to find relief the person never slows down enough to notice their actual experience. The discharge gets rid of this unbearably intense energy, albeit bypassing the process of integration or understanding, and restores the organism to its former sense of homeostasis. The rush of energy is usually extremely pleasurable, almost orgasmic, but then leaves the individual feeling depleted and often guilt ridden about the emotional or physical damage he or she has caused. They are also left with the negative prediction and constructed reality that the only way for them to manage the energy of anger is by discharging it in blaming, shaming or attacking and that it would be impossible to tolerate the experience of irritation and anger without these behaviors. The difficulty in undoing outrages and tantrums is that they are often so pleasurable (perhaps even socially acceptable and encouraged in certain instances such as for politicians or lawyers, or in certain kinds of therapies) that the person may have a difficult time seeing why they would want to trade the defense in

for the feeling. The good news is that the actual experience of anger and irritation, without the discharge, is also extremely pleasant and usually experienced as an adrenalized fizz of readiness in the body, a fire in the belly of tremendous heat and energy, or a thrilling aliveness that runs through the whole torso.

The first thing that a facilitator does when he or she notices a verbal or physical discharge, righteous indignation or an outburst is to ask the person if they are feeling outraged. The facilitator then points to the behavior and informs the person that this is a discharge of the feeling and not the feeling itself. The next question is "What will happen to you and your feelings if you continue to discharge?" At this point one of three sequences of events can follow. In the first case the client recognizes the cost to themselves and their experience if they continue to discharge. The facilitator can then help them to explore and contain their experience. (As noted earlier the actual experience of anger is very pleasurable.) In the second case, the client does not recognize the cost of the discharge and indicates that they are having a very good time discharging. The facilitator can then point out that they are making a positive prediction and help them to reality test in the group or their environment the possible consequences of their discharge. A third possibility is that the client fully realizes the cost to themselves and their experience and yet feel almost incapable of containing themselves. If this is the case, the facilitator can ask them to describe what it is like to try to contain themselves and to explore very specifically and slowly their sensations and feelings. This will usually decondition the impulse to discharge in the same way that one deconditions anxious feelings and sensations in the body. The facilitator can then notice that the client seems less frantic (if this is indeed true) and help them to practice the skill of containing and exploring their primary feelings.

Differences With Systems Centered Therapy; Mirroring, Pacing, Reframing, Bodywork, Meditation, and an accent on Therapeutic Artistry

The danger that exists with the Systems Centered techniques (or any technique) is that they can be used in a wooden or formulaic way which bypasses a quality of contactful Being at an

essence level. When this happens techniques inevitably become disruptive to the therapeutic flow. In the process of integrating any powerful technique or theory, facilitators must always be on guard against a kind of plastic imitative, 'brittle' intervention style that does not emanate from an authentic center and bone deep understanding. This becomes an 'as if' communication which only serves to unseat the sense of soulful contact which is the hallmark of a functional therapeutic alliance. When interventions are made from this level a 'dysrhythmia' in the facilitator is immediately picked up at conscious or unconscious levels by the group. For any therapeutic endeavor to succeed it is vital that the therapeutic artist stay in touch with the 'clay' of the transitional space between him or herself and the group members. Following this line of thinking, one might say that the first responsibility of any facilitator is to remain in their own center, manage their own anxiety and not become psychologically uprooted. As in Tai Chi, the uprooted, un-centered player is out of the game. To be sure, this is a delicate dance which requires that ones sensitivities are constantly in touch with the pulsation of ones own inner life as well as the interpersonal milieu of the group space. The therapeutic exchange is an arena which must always include the inner experience of the facilitator as well as the group members. Different contexts will call for a firm, confrontational no nonsense approach such as the Systems Centered techniques offer, while in others it is more appropriate to use a receptive, yielding approach such as mirroring, pacing or reframing. Given my therapeutic style, set of internal identifications, and characteristic approach to life, my personal predilection is to up the sense of safety in the group environment by using some measure of receptive techniques to soften the hard edges of a more confrontational 'yang' style. By choosing to mirror and call attention to the primary communications that group members are making in terms of body posture, voice tone and inflection, and the exploration of their moment to moment experience of sensations and feelings, and not reinforcing their secondary process communications (unless they are flooding and overwhelmed with their primary process) I am providing a powerful driving force away from the secondary processes of interpretations, advice giving, explaining or story telling. This approach provides a certain ambience which also resonates with the meditative and

spiritual practices which I have introduced into the group during the 'warm-up'. Furthermore, by skillfully choosing times during the group process when I 'intervene' by not intervening, and establishing an atmosphere of simply 'being with', Presence, and heart centered listening, the group as a whole often softens into a welcoming field for the energies of the authentic self.

Another indirect approach to helping someone into their primary, here and now experience is reframing. This is a simple and elegant way 'back in' which bypasses most of the turbulence that a more direct approach might incur. In reframing, after a group member has gone off into an explanation, story, or out of the here and now in some way, one simply asks 'After telling us all of this, how do you feel right now, here in this room?' Once the client is back in the room, in their feelings, it is usually quite easy to help them to deepen and explore their experience.

Although some diehard Systems Centered therapists might accuse me of ducking the 'authority issue' and perhaps even allowing a certain amount of secondary process defenses to 'infect' the group space, my personal experience is that a more confrontational style can at times become a restraining force relative to the overall therapeutic goals which I have for the client or group. It is helpful to remember that healing is a marathon and not a hundred yard dash, and not to keep the letter of the law while violating its spirit.

Another difference between this type of group work and Systems Centered Therapy is the explicit introduction of Body Oriented therapies and meditation practices. The Body Oriented therapies which I use are a functional extension of the overall goals which I have for the group of creating a permeable boundary between our primary, apprehensive experience and our secondary comprehensive understandings and interpretations of those experiences. (These are the same goals as Systems Centered Therapy.) The extraordinary value of body oriented approaches is that they intervene directly at the level of our breathing, muscular armoring, and the non-verbal communications of our characteristic postures and energetic organization. Similarly meditation gives group members a very direct experience of centering and observing their energy as awareness moves across the internal boundaries of time, space, reality and role.

Suffice it to say that there are many roads to Rome. Depending on the type of pathology, the context, the fragility or

strength of the therapeutic alliance, and the personal predilection of the facilitator one can choose to be either firm or yielding hard or soft, yang or yin. The important thing is that one remains in ones center, with the clear goal of helping each individual member and the group as a whole build their own center and ability to contact their primary, intuitive knowledge and experience. It is only when our thinking selves are connected to this deep inner wellspring and we have regained our access to our innate, authentic nature that we are living the path of wisdom. As we walk this path it is vital to remember that this wisdom can never be codified or rigidified into a dogma or a credo, owned or taken 'personally', it can only be lived from moment to moment. As Suzuki Roshi once commented "Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as an enlightened person. There is only enlightened activity". (43)

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Conclusion

In this paper I have presented a holistic model of group psychotherapy which is also applicable to working with individuals and couples integrating theories and practices which address the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual dimension of our experience. The foundation for this model is the Systems Centered therapy which Dr. Yvonne Agazarian has developed. The goals of working in this holistic model are resonant with the goals of Systems Centered Therapy as well as that of many meditative and body oriented approaches to human development. These goals are to develop a consistent and reliable access to our primary, authentic experience, and to create a permeable boundary between our apprehensive, intuitive self which receives our experience in an instinctive primary modality (experience first and words second) and our comprehensive, thinking selves which makes sense of our experience by generating explanations and interpretive maps. (44) By using practices from many traditions which share these common goals, my hope is that a synergistic effect will be created which can help individuals and groups to develop on many levels simultaneously.

The fundamental principles which these disciplines and traditions share in common and which they use to help people attain the above stated goals are those of presence or mindfulness in the here and now, process, a notion of an authentic, spontaneous self, essence or modality of Being, the observation that there are defenses or forces that restrain us from living in a continuous awareness of our spontaneous and authentically evolving experience as it shifts from moment to moment, and that there is a developmental order which is spiraling and non-linear which we can observe in individuals and groups as they mature in their discipline of practicing these principles.

In closing, I would like to pose several questions which occur to me as areas for further exploration. 1) What specific body-oriented techniques, meditations and spiritual practices might correspond to the different modules of group development? 2) Is there any relationship between the development of creativity and working in this way? 3) Does working in this way have any significant impact on physical disease processes? 4) Can working in this way help to develop mature, responsible communities in which members are able to have full access to their inner authority as they support each other in their spiritual, emotional, mental and physical growth? 5) How can we develop a meaningful dialogue between practitioners from a variety of disciplines around the choices of intervention strategies for working with the restraining forces to our primary, intuitive experience? 6) How can practitioners develop a sense of therapeutic artistry which includes the widest possible variety of therapeutic options without sacrificing theoretical integrity? 7) Does the ability to be in touch with our primary, apprehensive and intuitive experience positively influence our ability to care for and interact with our natural environment and ecology?

A final note. It is useful to remember that all therapeutic environments are a reality which we have constructed in order to help individuals, groups, couples and families to reach their therapeutic goals. As such they have no inherent, organic existence of their own. In the end, like the Buddhist notion of 'no-self' they are merely empty containers which we must fill with the wine of experience. In creating these environments and therapeutic approaches we must be willing to see them grow, change

and adapt even as we do and be able to step outside of them and to dis-identify even as the artist does from an art piece. In this way we can keep our involvement fresh and alive and filled with the creative essence of our endeavor. If we can do this hopefully we can remain sensitive and responsive to the context and requirements of the moment and thus model in our being the spontaneous, creative and alive stance which we are trying to teach.

It is my hope that this paper can help to seed discussion amongst and between practitioners who ordinarily might not come into contact with each others ideas and practices. If this occurs to even a small degree I will feel that my effort has been worthwhile.

footnotes

(1) Many recent scientific books and theorists have explored the idea that the true nature of reality may be similar to a hologram in which not only is everything inextricably interconnected, everything is also reflected inside of everything else. Two publications which contain good scientific/psychological discussions of this idea are The Holographic Paradigm and Other Paradoxes, Shambala, Boulder & London, 1982 edited by Ken Wilber and The Holographic Universe, Harper/Perennial, N.Y., 1992, by Michael Talbott.

(2) Yvonne Agazarian, A Theory of Living Human Systems and The Practice of Systems Centered Psychotherapy, Special Presentation at the Thirty Seventh Annual Meeting of the A.G.P.A., Feb.15, 1993, San Diego, Calif., p.7

(3) Ibid., p.18-19

(4) Tom Yeomans, Soul Wound and Psychotherapy, The Concord Institute Pamphlet Series #2, The Concord Institute, Box 82, Concord, Mass., 01742, June 1994, p.6-9

(5) Jack Kornfield, A Path With Heart, Bantam Books, 1993

(6) Many Body Oriented Psychotherapies are predicated on the idea

of the 'functional unity' of the body and mind, which was originally a concept of Wilhelm Reich's. Two books which discuss at length the philosophy, theory and practice of Body Oriented Psychotherapy are Elsworth Baker, Man in the Trap, Collier Macmillan Publ., London, 1980, and Ron Kurtz, Body Centered Psychotherapy, the Hakomi Method, LifeRhythm, P.O. Box 806, Mendocino, Cal, 1990

(7) For an extended discussion of the quality of 'essence' from both a spiritual and psychological point of view see A.H. Almass' The Pearl Beyond Price; Integration of Personality into Being., Diamond Books, Berkeley, Calif. 1988

(8) A modern discussion of the Buddhist teaching of 'no-self' is found in Jack Kornfield, A Path With Heart, p.198-214

(9) Yvonne Agazarian, A Theory Of Living Human Systems... p.36

(10) Abraham Maslow, Toward a Psychology of Being, D.Van Nostrand & Co., N.Y., 1968

(11) Many theorists write about a developmental order. For a Systems Centered therapy approach see Yvonne Agazarian, A Theory of Living Human Systems..., p.25-27, For Spiritual/Meditative viewpoints see Jack Kornfield, A Path with Heart, p.135-155, as well as Wilber, Engler & Brown, Transformations in Consciousness, Random House, N.Y., 1986

(12) See Arthur Robbins, A Multi-Modal Approach To Creative Arts Therapy, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, 1994, p.45-62, p.141-159 for a discussion of the development of therapeutic artistry.

(13) The importance of the experience of energy 'streaming' throughout the body-mind in a continuous cycle of charging discharging and resting was first explored by Wilhelm Reich. For a particularly good discussion of this see Jack Painter, Deep Bodywork and Personal Development, Bodymind Books, Mill Valley, Calif. 1987, p.119-136

(14) Eugene Gendlin in Focusing, Bantam Books, 1981 discusses a

technique for tuning into the body's wisdom during the therapeutic process. Although this is not exactly the same process I am engaging in here, the philosophical attitude and underpinnings are the same.

(15) Yvonne Agazarian, A Theory of Living Human Systems.... p.11-16

(16) Alexander Lowen, Bioenergetics, Penguin Books, 1975 also Ron Kurtz, Body Centered Psychotherapy, The Hakomi Method, & Wilhelm Reich, Character Analysis, Simon & Schuster, N.Y., 1972. All these texts contain good discussions of character armor and character structure.

(17) Alexander and Leslie Lowen, The Way To Vibrant Health, a manual of bioenergetic exercises, Harper & Row, 1977.

(18) 'Pulsation' is another fundamental human experience which was first scientifically explored by Wilhem Reich. See The Function of The Orgasm, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1973

(19) There are many books currently available on Tai Chi and Chi Kung exercises. While of course nothing can substitute for first hand experience, a book which provides an excellent overview of the Taoist approach to health, personal and spiritual development is Mantak & Manneewan Chia, Awaken Healing Light of The Tao, Healing Tao Books, P.O. Box 1194, Huntington, N.Y., 11743, 1993.

(20) Yvonne Agazarian, A Theory of Living Human Systems.... p.5-7

(21) Tom Yeomans, The Corona Process; Group Work in a Spiritual Context, Concord Institute Pamphlet Series #3, Box 82, Concord, Mass., 01742, Oct., 1994, p.9-11

(22) Tom Yeomans, Soul Wound and Psychotherapy, p. 4-5

(23) Yvonne Agazarian, A Theory Of Living Human Systems.... p.7

(24) Yvonne Agazarian, Systems Centered Intermediate Training 3, Training Manual, Korman Suites, Philadelphia, Nov.13-17,1994 p.35-41

- (25) Yvonne Agazarian, A Theory of Living Human Systems....
- (26) Tom Yeomans, Spiritual Psychology: An Introduction, The Concord Institute Pamphlet Series #1, The Concord Institute, Box 82 , Concord, Mass. 01742, June 1992, p.9-13
- (27) Roberto Assagioli, Psychosynthesis, Penguin Books, 1965, p.74-77
- (28) Yvonne Agazarian, A Theory of Living Human Systems.... p.21-25
- (29) Ibid., p.3
- (30) Ibid., p. 22
- (31) Yvonne Agazarian & R. Peters, The Visible and Invisible Group, Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd. London, 1985, Chapter 5.
- (32) Yvonne Agazarian, Systems Centered Intermediate Training 3, Training Manual, p. 136-142
- (33) Yvonne Agazarian, A Theory of Living Human Systems....,p.28-
- (34) Ibid. p.32
- (35) Arthur Robbins, A Multi-Modal Approach To Creative Art Therapy, p.30-31
- (36) Yvonne Agazarian, Orientation to Systems Centered Leadership in Group as a Whole, Systems Centered Workshop #2, Newark, N.J.,May 1991 .
- (37) Yvonne Agazarian, A Theory Of Living Human Systems.... p.18, In Systems Centered Therapy all human systems have the primary goals of survival and the secondary goals of environmental mastery.
- (38) Tom Yeomans, Soul Wound and Psychotherapy, p.6-9 The idea of 'presence' suggested here is also similar if not functionally equivalent to what is referred to as the 'containing role' in Systems Centered Therapy.

(39) Yvonne Agazarian, Systems Centered Intermediate Training 3, Training Manual, p.66-86

(40) Ibid., p.86-96

(41) Ibid., p.97

(42) Ibid., p.99-103

(43) Jack Kornfield, A Path With Heart, p.269

(44) Yvonne Agazarian, A Theory Of Living Human Systems... p.18-19, 36-37

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APpe~^ ~o

THE FIVE MODULES IN |

THE HIERARCHY OF DEFENSE ANALYSIS

IN SYSTEMS-CENTERED GROUP AND INDIVIDUAL THERAPY by
Yvonne M. Agazanan.

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Defenses are the restraining forces that divert the energy of living human systems from their goals. A system-centered orientation focuses on reducing these restraining forces. The work of systems-centered therapy is to bring the system energy across the boundaries of time and space into the present and direct it towards the goal. Reducing defenses at these boundaries is the work of both the patient and the therapist. Learning how to do this are the goals of systems-centered training.

In the hierarchy of defense analysis, each step of the work builds on the one before it and lays the groundwork for the work that comes after it. The work is done in five specific modules, each one of which has specific tasks, specified goals and clear outcome criteria. These modules are divided into two sets, the first of which address the defenses against conflicts with authority; the second of which addresses conflicts with intimacy.

THE FIRST THREE MODULES: CONFLICTS WITH AUTHORITY.

MODULE ONE: social defenses and the triad of symptomatic defenses. At the beginning of any system-centered work session our task is to bring the energy across the boundaries and focus it on the goals. Social

| defenses are weakened first, the symptomatic triad of defenses next. The symptomatic triad of defenses are

| so named because they generate the triad of most common symptoms. It is in the work in this first round

| that the major remission of symptoms occur.

Social defenses act as restraining forces as we change roles from our social selves to our working selves and role to our role behavior to our training or therapy goals. Social defenses are the oil on the possibly troubled waters of every day life. Social defenses are also the shorthand that signal status in the pecking order and establishes the rules of relationship. Because breaking the social rules is such a shaming experience, and because the social defenses are such a powerful influence on what one does and does not do, undoing social defenses is a crucial step towards changing from stereotype to functional roles.

The symptomatic triad of defenses are addressed in sequence: first the cognitive defenses against anxiety, second the tension defenses against feeling and third are the defenses that discharge emotions before they can be experienced.

Cognitive defenses: negative predictions of the catastrophes that are just around the corner, or believing that others are thinking critical or embarrassing things about you, are cognitive defenses against what is making us anxious in the first place. When we explain reality instead of explore it; when we believe in our anxious thoughts instead of recognizing our conflicts in the here and now; we construct a world in our mind that becomes more real to us than the world outside. The solution of a constructed reality generates still more anxiety, tension and irritability as well as other secondary experiences like guilt and dread and worrying. By fleeing from real inner or outer conflicts into an imagined world, we still have all the problems that existed in the first place plus all the problems generated by our imagination as well.

Defensive tension: Tension is like a straightjacket for our feelings. Tension involves us with

muscular aches and pains and physical symptoms instead of the original conflict. Tension induced muscular aches and pains, and the symptoms of anxiety and irritability are uncomfortable but not serious. These can be worked with in SCT just like any other defenses. Non-benign conversion symptoms, however, can be dangerous. Conversion symptoms need to be reconverted before any other defense modification is done.

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Discharge defenses like tantrums, histrionics and depressions, drugs and drinking and going on a tear, are all ways of discharging or sedating the energy in emotions and are often mistaken for the emotion itself. Discharging empties us of our inner experience: the feelings and sensations and impulses in the everyday experiences of pain and grief, love and hate, envy and jealousy, murderous rage, curiosity, lust and joy. Acting on internal conflicts instead of understanding them makes for double trouble by transferring problems to the outside world. Bringing old solutions to new situations makes new situations into old.

MODULE IWO: role-locks in relationships. The second module addresses role relationships with authority that divert energy from working goals by establishing role-locks in defensive compliance and/or defiance. Role-locks bring past relationships into the present. Thus we become the identified patient, victim or bully, scapegoat, hero or rnarqr. These one-up, one-down relationships lock us into a power struggle with an outside authority and blinds us to the stubborn conflicts with the authority in ourselves.

MODULE THREE: resistance to change. Module three marks the transition between the focus on conflicts with authority to the focus on conflicts with intimacy. Work on resistance to change occurs at every transition within every module. Module three work confronts our resistance to change. Sooner or later we all take a stand and resist all influence as if our life depended upon it, even if we are being influenced in a direction we want. We experience ourselves as standing alone, imprisoned in the fort that we have built to defend ourselves from enemies that neither understand nor care for us. Breaking free of the impasse requires us to shift our preoccupation with outside authorities and address our conflicts with our own personal authority.

I~ LAST TWO MODULES: CONFLICTS WITH INTIMACY.

MODULE FOUR: defenses against intimacy: The fourth module addresses closeness and distance in relationships with oneself and with others and involves undoing the defenses against separation, individuation and interdependence. The work of undoing defenses against intimacy builds on the work of the first three modules and requires us to overcome the barriers of humiliation and shame, shyness and embarrassment. It takes all our courage to contain the turbulence; follow the signals of dread into despair; know the emptiness of the loss of the feeling self; the terror of the world as we know it falling apart. The way out is through: an entry and emergence through chaos into transformation.

MODULE FIVE: defenses against knowledge: the fifth and final module puts it all together. The previous work has enabled us to contain ourselves within the containing environment of the modules. Working through

the hierarchy of defense analysis equips us with the skills we need to continue to do the work on our own. In the wake of modula vivo, two kinds of knowing and ~ding become permanently available. We have learnt how to cross the boundaries between imagination and intuition, between comprehension and apprehension, between the woM of words and the woM without words, from fantasy into reality. As we have learned to undo the hierarchy of defense we have also learned how to be in the unknown and to discover what we know.

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An Introduction to Group Therapy
for Body, Mind and Spirit:
A System Centered (c) Approach

By Michael Robbins, M.A., L.M.H.C.,1996

As the field of psychotherapy moves into the twenty first century, there is a greater awareness that all the dimensions of our lives are inextricably related. It is becoming increasingly impossible to simply treat someone psychologically without also taking into account their physical and spiritual well being. Like the eastern proverb of the blind men each describing different parts of an elephant and believing they were touching different creatures, we are coming to the common sense realization that as practitioners specializing in one area of healing or another, we all have our hands on the same animal. All the systems of a human being exist as a functional unity. Furthermore, emerging scientific paradigms indicate that change at any level has reverberations that echo from the molecular to the cosmic levels in a great chain of being. Perhaps if our sensitivities were highly enough developed we would realize that it is life itself we touch every time we make an intervention as a healer.

Common sense also tells us that the larger the system, the greater its potential and effect. For example, when the federal government cuts money for the Arts in our schools this effects a myriad of systems which exist below it, from the music teacher who loses his job to the mother and father who have to deal with the disappointment, rage and acting out of their teen age daughter who played first violin in the orchestra last year. In Systems Centered (c) thinking, this is called the principle of "hierarchy". Like a series of Russian nesting dolls, the larger system provides a context and environment for the smaller systems below it to function. This principal applies directly to group therapy. The group as a whole is the context in which each member will do their work. If the group leader can help the group to monitor the boundary between the group as a whole and the individual group members he or she can help the group to create the best possible environment for the work of healing to occur. If the group as a whole is working well it will also provide a tremendous amount of energy to each individual member to do their work.

In Systems Centered Therapy (c) all the group work occurs in "functional sub-groups". A functional sub-group forms around resonance for the experience which is being explored rather than on stereotypes such as gender, age, religion or sexual

preference. The sub-group then works within the container of the larger group somewhat like people rowing a boat (with as many 'oars' as there are sub-group members). As each member builds on the others experience the 'boat' of the sub-group moves forward. Sub-group members also learn how to stay in eye contact with each other, to feel each others energetic resonance, and to join each other at a similar depth of experience.

In Systems Centered Therapy (c) it is understood that no group can work with all of its energy available until its members have crossed the boundaries of space, time, reality and role. A group that is clear about where it will meet (and how each member will get there), its time boundaries, and keeps to these contracts in reality has a foundation on which to build a basic sense of trust. The boundaries of reality and role are perhaps a little less obvious. To cross the reality boundary group members must psychologically cross out of their fantasies about what they thought it might be like to be in the group into the existential reality of what it is like to be in the group. This is both a simple and extremely complex accomplishment. A real life example of this principle is when a couple meets on a first date. Each party is bringing a host of positive and negative predictions to the experience. Before they can even begin to deal with their real relationship with each other, they must navigate through the turbulent waters of their hopes and fears of what the date will be like. The role boundary is another membrane which will inevitably have to be crossed before a group member has their full energy available to work. Outside the group a person might be a teacher, parent, therapist or wear any number of different hats. Each of these roles will have certain goals and behavior associated with it. Inside the group, the person must come into their role as a group member and learn something about the norms and behaviors of the particular group they have entered and adjust their behavior to meet the goals that they have for themselves in the group context. In a Systems Centered group this will mean learning how to resonate with other group members and work in a sub-group. You might also notice that these skills of getting ones energy across the boundaries of time, space, reality and role are exactly the skills which we all need to use every day to function effectively. By practicing these skills in a very explicit way, group members are learning how to access all of their energy,

with mindful presence and awareness, in any real life situation they encounter.

Once a group member has all of their energy available for work they then encounter a variety of defensive mechanisms which may restrain them from living in their authentic experience. Depending on the life experience that someone has brought to the work they will have a stronger or weaker salience for different levels of defense. The first level that all groups must address is called the 'triad of symptomatic defenses'. The reason for this name is that when these defenses are undone there is often a dramatic decrease in symptoms such as anxiety, psychosomatic headaches or indigestion, depression and acting out in tantrums, blaming or other forms of self destructive behavior. Briefly, these defenses are 1) our cognitive misconstructions of reality such as mind reads and negative or positive predictions which generate real feelings which may or may not have anything to do with our existential reality in the moment 2) physical tension which binds our emotions like a strait jacket and blocks the signal of the original feeling from reaching our awareness, and 3) the ways in which we discharge our feelings by acting out in blaming, outrages or tantrums or act them in by becoming depressed or numb. When these defenses are undone the group can begin to address the habitual roles such as being a victim, bully or caretaker which they play in the group (and in life!).

As a body oriented psychotherapist who has also spent a significant portion of my life involved with spiritual practice and in various types of spiritual communities, I have been very excited to integrate Systems Centered Therapy (c) into the other disciplines and approaches I have been using. There was such an immediate resonance that I felt as if a light had been switched on and a whole library of experiences suddenly fell into place. In many ways this form of group work is like an open eyed, interactive, mindfulness meditation which has the goal of getting each member, sub-group and the group as a whole centered and grounded in their authentic experience. I see possibilities for a cross fertilization here which can greatly enhance the practice of a whole variety of disciplines. In the group work which I do, I combine body oriented therapies, meditation, art therapy and Systems Centered Therapy (c). Although each of these activities take place during separate periods of the group work, functionally

they operate in a synergistic fashion to help the group and each member accomplish their goals.

A major goal of this work is to help people move out of explaining or interpreting their experience into exploring their experience at the leading edge of their growth. As group members manage the frustration of not explaining as well as not behaving in their habitual and reactive ways they come right up against the unknown and have to deal with the primary energy of their life force. Using all of the above mentioned disciplines I provide a clear and disciplined format to undo the repetitive loops that we replay again and again in every aspect of our lives, to explore the disowned parts of the self, and to recognize the various ways we have learned to defend against our primary experience.

One of the reasons why I believe this type of disciplined group work is so important for people in psycho-physical practices such as Yoga or Tai Chi and for serious meditators is that it offers such a grounded no nonsense approach to psychological growth which is totally non-pathologizing and cuts right to the quick of how we often get ourselves into all kinds of mischief. Over and over again I have seen how spiritual work can become fueled by un-worked out personality issues which lead, often with the best of intentions, to people acting out, repressing or somatizing their shadow selves rather than exploring, confronting and transforming them. Tragically, the disowned parts of the self comes back to meet them as their fate. This type of group work offers the opportunity to explore the disowned parts of the self to very deep levels in a gentle and firm way.

To be sure this is only a brief introduction to what is both a complex field of study and a profound experience. This is serious work, which can be life changing. It is also a lot of fun. Most importantly, it is real. If you can keep your sense of existential humor and compassion around while your explanations, interpretations and constructs of reality take a hike, risk letting go of your familiar roles for a while, and relax deeply into the center of your being as you hang out at the edge of the unknown with mindfulness and curiosity, you might discover something new and important.

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We Are Crossing a Boundary Now
(An SCT Invocation)

j Michael Robbins, M.A., L.M.H.C.

We are crossing a boundary now
Leave behind your familiar maps and time honored interpretations,
Pack them neatly, and check them at the door.
They will be kept safe for you until you return,
(though you may not want them anymore).
We are crossing a boundary now
The constructs of past and future are slowly fading away
Surrender your war stories, your tragedies, romances,
and catastrophizing into the flame of the present.
Dear friends who have responded to the invitation
The ceremony has begun,
The inner bride and groom are at the altar,
Let us not keep the guests waiting.
We are crossing a boundary now
We have reached the edge of the unknown
The mystery from which all creativity bubbles forth
like an effervescent spring of possibilides
Make sure you've brought your curiosity along!
We are crossing a boundary now
We have entered the threshold where the
Everywhere and the Always meets the Here and the Now
We ask that the energies of Self and Essence guide us on our journey
That we have the courage to not hold back on our explorations.
We seek the wisdom to see through illusions,
To dissolve the fears that we have told ourselves that we must hold on to
year after year after year after year after year,
The discrimination to know the difference between
the paper tigers and the real ones
How many of those tigers have long ago
snuck back into the primordial ooze??
Leaving us quaking superstitiously,
our bodies still believing they were there??
They're not even alive any more!
Their bones have long ago turned to dust!
Open your eyes!

Dare to become present!
Embrace yourself! All of you!
Nothing that is real is forbidden!
We are crossing a boundary now
Into the sacred circle
Into the cauldron of each other
The fire is hot - Pay attention!
Listen to the instrument of your body
The life force is flowing through it
kind resonance with each other - Join on that!
Trust the current - it knows where to go
The adventure is calling, the journey has begun,
Let's go!

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