

2

Groups:

The Impossible Teachers

MANY PEOPLE ARE AFRAID to step forward and facilitate groups. There's good reason to fear groups; their potential power is enormous. They can create in the facilitator a sense of being dominated, judged or shamed.

Fear of conflict is one of the reasons governments have shown little tolerance for dissidence, anger and revolt. People are forced to resort to riots, civil disobedience and revolution to be heard and to create social change. Political leaders, afraid of being attacked, unconsciously suppress violence and people who are angry.

Before we can transform communities with conflict, we have to be able to survive it ourselves. A special kind of innerwork is needed to transform us into elders who can sit in the fire. Without such a transformation, we will continue to repress our awareness of group tensions and thereby perpetuate the world's troubles.

Recently, my partner Amy and I facilitated a gathering in the United States where racial issues between Black and white lesbians arose. The interactions among the women were fiery, but the women's flexibility created an emotional and touching resolution. Almost everyone present felt relieved.

To our surprise, a white man stood up and said that he was upset at my having allowed the conflict between the women to arise in the first place. He implied that their fiery manner of resolving the conflict should not have been permitted. "Why did such open conflict have to occur at all?" he asked.

He shook from head to foot as he mustered the courage to tell us that he and his wife had been part of "the best circles in the U.S. and Europe." They had studied with great gurus and international leaders, and had never experienced such trouble in a group before.

I realized that his world had been damaged by the women's openness to tension. He was angry at Amy and me because we hadn't recreated his world and its cultural norms. He was upset that the topic of homosexuality had been brought up at all. Adding insult to injury, the women were very vocal about it. He was pressed to consider problems he thought were not his own.

Instead of defending myself or striking out at him for his insensitivity to the issues, I tried to listen to his criticism and make certain I understood him. After all, if I couldn't understand him, how could I ask him to understand others?

When he finished speaking, I told him I disagreed with his views. I thanked him for sharing them. I assured him I was happy he'd spoken out. We needed his viewpoint. I said I would be more aware of the interests he represented in the future. He was pleased by my attention. He announced proudly it was time that his voice could be heard as well as others'.

Some participants in that meeting did not agree with him and said he was a typical white male. Others were interested in my openness to mainstream values and were happy about the airing of diverse opinions. Everyone became involved in excited dialogue and the day ended with an unusual openness to heated discussions.

But I was unhappy. I went home hurt and depressed, and sat in a chair with my head hanging. I had been through such criticism in groups many times, but something I could not identify

made me so sad that I asked Amy to help me work with my feelings. Had I repressed my anger against the man for his hurtful views about women? I knew his opinions had upset me, but there was something more. Amy suggested the following innerwork.

AN INNERWORK EXERCISE FOR CLARIFYING MOODS

Amy said, "Imagine a difficult scene. It can be any scene that puts you in a painful feeling state. Try to see yourself in detail in that state."

I pictured myself in the scene that afternoon when the man criticized me.

"Now look at a part of your body that interests you," she said.

In my mind's eye, I saw myself sitting, depressed. I focused on my head, which seemed to be hanging very low.

"Be patient. Try to observe something new in that area of your body, something you have never seen before. This may take a minute or two."

To my surprise, I saw a guillotine hanging over me, like those used centuries ago in Europe to cut off people's heads.

"Let the story of this new something unfold," Amy said.

I froze. I could barely look. But then I saw the blade come down. I was beheaded, in my imagination, for having been a social activist working for democracy and against the monarchy.

But what had cut off my head? Not the king, but a great spirit. I thought the scenario was getting pretty weird. The story unfolded further. I saw myself reborn in a new body. In my fantasy, the period was no longer historical Europe, but the American Revolution. I had a new personality. I was a social activist again, but much older. As this older person, I not only worked for the oppressed but was able to see everyone, oppressors and oppressed alike, as my children.

Suddenly I understood my feelings. The man who had criticized me that afternoon connected me to my own unhappiness about being one-sided. The deepest part of me wanted to cut off my own head or change my mind, so to speak. In other words, I was unconsciously angry at myself for having secretly sided with the problems of the oppressed to the extent that I could no longer empathize with anyone else. This problem went way back in my personal history of being socially oppressed. Now I insisted on

growth so I wouldn't have to resist mainstream people anymore. I wanted to see all people, including the man who had attacked me, as my children.

My insight made me weep with joy. Amy and I hugged. My mood changed immediately. In my fantasy, the beheading was not by some old king who would have represented internal domination over me. Instead it was spirit, something more meaningful, that wanted me to change.

I was thrilled at being able to grow. The afternoon's difficult group process was transformed into an incredible learning experience. I could hardly wait to resume our work with the group.

When we started the next morning, I was ready for anything. The man who had criticized me stood up before I'd even spoken and told everyone how good he felt and how much he had learned yesterday. I was surprised by him and wept with happiness. I told the group about my learning too.

THE SCHOOL OF EXPERIENCE

If you have worked with multicultural tensions, you know that trying to facilitate without training is like climbing to a roof without a ladder.

Worldworkers need innerwork and relationship skills and must understand class, economics and international politics. Inner problems, local issues and international issues entwine in every group process.

In the near future, our able leaders will not have been prepared by education, rank or money. Instead, they will have survived the oppression they were born into. People who live in two worlds at once, who are members of a disavowed group within a majority culture, have been forced either to become victims or to survive by becoming multicultural leaders. We need the help of those who have survived, whether because of luck, intelligence, awareness or love. Where else can we turn to find elders who have the motivation and consciousness to protect human rights?

Today, conflict-resolution schools often deal with social issues in an academic fashion and avoid working with the experience of rage. The mainstream in every country tends to skirt the anger of the oppressed classes. Politics and psychology pressure outsiders to assimilate and integrate. Western thought is biased toward peace and harmony. That's why many non-mainstream

groups consider the very idea of "conflict resolution" a mainstream fabrication.

Ironically, procedures that implicitly or explicitly forbid anger ultimately provoke conflict, because they favor people who are privileged enough to live in areas where social struggles can be avoided.

Meanwhile, people who exist on the periphery or the lowest rung on the social scale are treated by society as untouchable. Their needs are further repressed by the assumption that they should be even-tempered. We saw an example of this in Chapter One, in the case of the white man who refused to talk to the angry Black man. People excluded from mainstream freedoms and power are left with two choices. They can resort to riot and revolution, or they can turn to crime and drugs.

We must be conscious of the mainstream bias in dispute resolution systems that side with government policies or ignore the emotional aspects of disenfranchisement. On the other hand, as my guillotine fantasy indicates, those of us who want to facilitate should not fall into one-sided support of minority positions either. That makes the majority feel marginalized by community process.

The facilitator's task is not to do away with the use of rank and power, but to notice them and make their dynamics explicit for the whole group to see.

INTERNALIZING OPPRESSION

By instituting hierarchies, culture creates a host of subjective and objective problems. People with rank don't have to put up with the tensions that marginalize less empowered folks. White cultures, for example, are characterized by a "glass ceiling" that keeps individuals of lower rank, such as women and People of Color, from climbing the corporate ladder beyond a certain point.

Everyone internalizes the culture's ranking system, permitting external oppression to extend as a subjective force in personal life. Many people from minority groups are plagued by self-doubt, self-hatred or hopelessness and think these feelings are only their own problems. They believe they are "sick" or that they have been damaged by their immediate community. They may be unaware that it is the mainstream culture that is troubling them.

Mainstream people, too, can be hurt by internalized oppression. Most chronic self-criticism stems from the internalization of mainstream views. People put themselves down if they don't meet the standards of the local government, their religion, their school, or their social class. When self-critical people do inner-work, they are apt to meet a figure who puts them down because they are not valuable in some culturally defined way: they have the wrong physical appearance, skin color, hair, health, race, religion, age, gender, occupation, training or economic status. The outer world and its value system dominate them internally.

Politics and psychology are married, as we say, for better or worse. Every political move by the majority has consequences for how we each deal with ourselves. For example, people who are disenfranchised suffer more depression than other people, because they see themselves as less valuable.

Every time you work to free yourself from a sense of internal oppression, you begin to transform the cultures you live in. I once worked with a woman from an Eastern European country in which women were expected to keep quiet and let the men do the talking. This woman dreamed that she was supposed to learn to speak out. When she shared this dream with some of her friends and family, they cautioned her. They wanted her to stay the same, both for her sake and theirs. She dreamed that her family put her in jail, but she broke out. She decided to risk speaking up. The results were dramatic. She led the first all-women's street march against her country's dictatorship.

As you liberate yourself from domination by mainstream values, your new behavior may bring you into conflict with your family and other groups you have felt part of. Some of your behavior may not "fit in" with any group. You may run up against belief systems about how women, men, People of Color, and people of various ages, professions, educational backgrounds, and religious and spiritual inclinations should behave.

World tensions such as these are intimately connected with personal development. They send you back to work on yourself again and again. But worldwork supports you to change by making you aware of how you encourage or oppress yourself and others.

THE INSIDIOUS SCOPE OF OPPRESSION

Oppression is so pandemic — so common in your body, your friends and your environment — that you and others in your life may consider this uncomfortable state-of-mind normal. You may feel compelled to take tranquilizers or use drugs or drink to soothe these tensions. Such behavior inadvertently helps to maintain the world status quo of oppression.

In all cultures, many individuals are depleted by oppression. If you are a member of an overtly oppressed group, you can exhaust yourself dealing with your personal pain and fighting not only the mainstream but members in your group who are unconscious of oppression's effects. If you try to ignore inner and outer tensions, you may become an overeater, a workaholic or a sex addict, develop ulcers or find your immune system has weakened under stress.

If you are a non-mainstream person, you may experience so many pressures to conform, both from your counterculture group and the mainstream, that you decide to go into hiding as a quiet, average citizen.

If you are a mainstream person, so much of you is oppressed by your culture that you may feel invisible and have little energy to help others.

WHERE WE FIND OUR LESSONS

Democracy is a great vision born of social tension. However, when people suppress their consciousness of immediate, internal and face-to-face oppression, they reduce democracy to nothing more than a legal procedure. Democracy is a dream of equality, but this dream is far from a reality.

Worldwork forwards a deeper democracy, an awareness of how power can be used against individuals and how this power can be transformed. Worldwork studies the inner and outer effects of legal, military, police and terrorist tactics to find out the extent to which people are abused by them and also how these tactics are part of every community process. Such information helps worldworkers to devise alternative, grass roots mediation techniques.

But we must have more than techniques. We need preventive diplomacy that will foster consciousness.

It may seem obvious to you that personal and international conflicts repeat themselves when underlying issues have not been addressed. You might even wonder why the author goes to the trouble of making this point. Yet think about yourself, your family, your friends and your ex-friends or ex-partners. How many conflicts have you failed to resolve in your personal life? Why are they unresolved? Have you accepted responsibility? Have you considered the influence of rank and power, and political issues such as gender, education, race, age and economic class? Have you thought about differences in power due to the sense of oppression? How many problems have you resolved in your immediate family?

How about your worldwork life? When was the last time you articulated a conflict in a group or organization? How did you do it? Did you seek a quick fix instead of trying to understand the roots of the conflict? Did you think about more money or efficiency first, or did you go for the deep issues?

Do you offer to facilitate problems that arise in your home, at your job, at the supermarket or on the street? How do you define social responsibility? Does it include intervening in social tensions everywhere, including movie theaters and restaurants? To be more than a conflict mediator or organizational development expert, to make real change, you will have to answer these questions and clarify your deepest goals.

EVERY CONFLICT IS POTENTIALLY THE MOST IMPORTANT ONE

Worldworkers raise our consciousness of personal, group and social issues. They are caretakers of democracy anywhere, any time. An elder — even a young one — must feel free to make trouble. An elder stands for all sides. When people threaten to revolt against mainstream mores, do not turn against either the mainstream or the protesters. In democratic countries, important changes have resulted from civil disobedience.

Every conflict is, in a way, the most important one. It can be the beginning of world change. For example, many United States citizens in the 1960s protested the war in Vietnam. They risked their lives at demonstrations and went to prison afterward, but

they changed Americans' thinking about the acceptability of armed conflict.

Democratic countries such as the United States don't yet have the necessary legal infrastructure to deal with radical social change. Moreover, laws will never be enough. Though they are important, laws cannot eradicate oppression, racism or sexism. In fact, they drive prejudice underground, where it continues to be active.

Worldworkers understand social issues only as the path to the meeting, so to speak. Beginning with the issues at hand while searching for interaction and sustainable dialogue, we automatically go beyond multiculturalism and political correctness, both of which are first reactions to racism, sexism, homophobia and bigotry.

Worldwork is the politics of awareness. It is not only about solving problems, but especially about community awareness.

THE TERMS OF WORLDWORK IN BRIEF

As a general practice, I try not to use jargon. It sets up unnecessary insider-outsider distinctions. Yet some new terms are important because they remind us that worldwork is a field paradigm in contrast to the paradigm that sees groups as nothing more than the sum of their parts.

Readers who are interested in greater elucidation of the following terms can refer to my earlier works, *The Year I*, *The Leader as Martial Artist* and *The Shaman's Body*.

Consensus

An agreement to address a certain topic or follow a direction for a limited time.

Edge

A communication block that occurs when an individual or group, out of fear, represses something that is trying to emerge. For instance, at the gathering I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the issues of race and homophobia didn't arise until the afternoon. The group had an "edge" against these topics. The women who brought them up felt they couldn't earlier, because the group edge prohibited these topics and the anger they would occasion. Likewise, the man with mainstream views did not feel

free to criticize me at first. Only after the group allowed the topics of race and homosexuality to be brought out did a new edge emerge for him as a mainstream person. His edge was not only to criticize the leadership, but also to dislike both the topics and the people talking about them.

Field

The atmosphere or climate of any community, including its physical, environmental and emotional surroundings.

Hot Spot

In a group setting, a moment of attack and defense, fight and flight, ecstasy, apathy or depression.

Metaskill

The feeling with which theory, information and techniques are applied. (See Amy Mindell's *Metaskills: The Spiritual Art of Therapy* for a complete analysis of this concept.)

Process

The flow of overt and covert communication within an individual, family, group, culture or environment. Process includes inexpressible feelings, dreams and spiritual experiences.

Primary Process

The self-description, methods and culture with which you and your group identify yourselves. "Process" in primary process emphasizes how identity changes in time.

Rank

A conscious or unconscious, social or personal ability or power arising from culture, community support, personal psychology and/or spiritual power. Whether you earned or inherited your rank, it organizes much of your communication behavior, especially at edges and in hot spots.

Role or Timespirit

A cultural rank, position or viewpoint that depends on time and place. Roles and timespirits change rapidly because they are a function of the moment and locality. Roles in groups are not fixed, but fluid. They are filled by different individuals and parties over time, keeping the roles in a constant state of flux.

Secondary Process

Aspects of ourselves that we, as individuals or groups, prefer not to identify with. Often we project these aspects onto people we view as the "enemy." We may marginalize or admire these qualities, creating inferior or superior traits in other groups.

NOT WHAT YOU DO, BUT HOW YOU DO IT

Let me explain these concepts further by relating them to typical small and large group processes. As a worldworker, you need information about the group you are facilitating. You also need awareness skills to notice the field with its communication edges and hot spots. For instance, if an employee complains about the boss and the employee's complaint is forgotten, a "hot spot" occurs. If the boss says nothing about the criticism and the employee says nothing about the boss's silence, the hot spot feelings fester. Eventually they lead to escalation and violence. Then history repeats itself through revolution.

Over and above information and awareness, worldworkers need "metaskills." They are crucial. Your work succeeds not because of what you know or do, but because of how you do it. Worldwork springs from your interest in other people and love for them. You care about who they are and what is happening to them. Eldership is an important feeling skill.

You will best be able to facilitate the resolution of tension if you can make contact with the elder in yourself. The elder keeps an eye on your internal process while also recognizing the language and body signals of other individuals in the group. The elder monitors the group's "primary" and "secondary" processes and knows that your process contributes to the make-up of the field.

Awareness of the "field" is different from knowledge of the parts of a system. It's like dreaming the overall dream, which includes everything that surrounds and permeates the body. The character of the field does not depend on stable and fixed parts, but on temporary roles and timespirits that flow within and outside of the immediate boundaries of the system. It is important to respect the roles and see the hierarchies which exist, but the deeper dynamics of the group can be accessed only through the field, the feelings which bind and separate us.

What is the field like in your house, your organization, your section of the city or country? What are the specific problems in your area? How could your grasp of the field be put in the service of resolving those problems?

WORLDWORK AND INDIGENOUS CULTURE

Indigenous people teach us a lot about atmosphere or fields. According to their traditions, the atmosphere is a sacred space ruled by the spirits of the North, East, South and West.

I call such spirits "timespirits." These elements, polarities or roles create the field and change in time. Any city street that is full of problems has undergone polarization around sensitive issues that might include gender, age, sexual orientation, race and money. Issues and themes have different sides to them — different directions in nature, so to speak. These different polar directions, or polarizations, require elders to facilitate. In a way, worldwork is an aspect of indigenous cultures.

How do we deal with the tensions of polarization around rank and cultural and psychological bias? Field work focuses on these tensions and improves the overall atmosphere by enabling them to express themselves. This causes many of the immediate issues to disappear or become more amenable to solution.

Work on the atmosphere is both personal and transpersonal. It brings people together. It often requires dialogues, arguments and moments of confusion or even chaos. Soon the air clears, and a new community atmosphere is created.

It is not only the worldworker who must learn to tolerate conflict. Group work enables the whole group to sustain tension for as long as resolution takes. This makes it possible for whole communities to sit in the fire. Instead of becoming more rigid and breaking apart when faced with a challenge, they are transformed in the direction of greater flexibility.

Like Native Americans, I consider the group atmosphere sacred, whether it is troubled or heavenly. We need elders who can create community, inviting everyone in and staying aware of timespirits' processes. Worldwork elders encourage people to stand for what they believe, to "channel" and voice these spirits, and to help express what is in the air. People who feel identified with one side of the issue speak for that. Others speak back. There is permission for people to change sides. If the particular

culture is open to them, movement and dance can also be used to express opinions, feelings and ideas.

THE RELATIVITY OF CONCEPTS

Terms such as inner and outer, politics and psychology, and good and bad are relative to one another. What seems inner today will be outer tomorrow. What we call psychology is politics for someone else. Evil for one group is what another defines as good. In process work, terms are considered meaningful because they describe experience, which is changeable, not because they are absolute truths.

In *The Meaning of Relativity*, Albert Einstein wrote, "The only justification for our concepts and system of concepts is that they serve to represent the complex of our experiences; beyond this they have no legitimacy."¹

If you find a situation in which worldwork concepts are inadequate to express experience, then they are wrong and need recreation. For example, I used to speak about the "shadow" in cultures, but today I avoid this term because it is a Eurocentric creation. It makes light more valuable than darkness, and has references to skin color.

Concepts of culture — normal and abnormal, healthy and ill, even the concepts of race, gender and age — are only concepts. They represent the governing social paradigms. The very use of such terms can sustain the existing problems. Though we have employed them to create psychology, sociology and politics, these concepts are relative. When they are normative, they abuse people who feel they do not fit them. I introduced new concepts such as edges, timespirits and hot spots to include those experiences and individuals who are marginalized.

Social relativity predicts that if all the abusive tyrants gave up their power, and all the freedom fighters came into power, very little would change. If all the oppressed were to move forward and the oppressors were to step down, chances are the world would not change in a sustainable way. Why? Because one power was blindly replaced with another. Only when all members of a community grow in awareness of power in themselves and others can true change occur.

The world has seen countless revolutions. The cold war was won by democracy and capitalism. Yet these changes do not protect individual liberties or stimulate enough of us to participate in government. We are still unconscious of the day-to-day relativity of power and how it is used.

CYCLES OF SPIRITUAL CRISIS

Anyone interested in conflict-training eventually undergoes a spiritual crisis precipitated by witnessing the constant violation of basic human rights. When faced with intractable conflict and the subtle oppression of minority groups, I have swung between fear of speaking out, rage against the oppressors and unconsciousness of my own righteous behavior. When faced with the way oppressed groups further oppress themselves and others, I have felt hopeless. Great dreams for our common future and the environment have motivated me to take risks, but then I have met problems that made me so sad, I wanted to quit. I have often thought that dealing with large groups in open city forums is impossible.

All of your childhood wounds reappear when you deal with large group conflict. At first, you experience yourself as a child again, in a world that is big, powerful and dangerous to your life. Moreover, much of your own inner development becomes public business, just as public tensions become your innerwork. Your sense of privacy is violated. You can't hide. The outer world invades you in the form of internal domination. Your innerwork becomes indivisible from worldwork.

Looking back, it seems that I have learned as much about myself from outer work as from innerwork. I feel fortunate that I had great dreams as motivations. I have been through many phases of personal development. I have had to accept my aggressive feelings toward the upper middle classes when they resist justice for minorities. I have learned to love those I was against. It was difficult, but only when I allowed myself to be angry could I move into and through my own hurts and frustrations, past and present, to realize that no one is really guilty and everyone needs to awaken together.

Today, everyone engaged in any conflict seems weak to me. People with apparent social power are weakened by their unconsciousness of the crucial issues of people without the same

power. Sometimes I even think there is no such thing as a mainstream. It is like a pervasive, powerful, often well meaning but hurtful ghost. People from the so-called mainstream, though they look mighty from certain viewpoints, are crippled where the proper use of power is concerned.

All of us who deal with intractable conflicts and global tensions are compelled to question our deepest beliefs and the meaning of life. Again and again, searching for answers to global problems throws us into a spiritual crisis. It has always seemed to me that these crises were valuable. They not only make us insecure and vulnerable but open us to seeking something infinite in mundane interactions.

Learning to get along with others is an easily stated ideal. Dealing with city forums, gangs, communities, businesses and universities creates strain from many sides. You must face situations so surprising and people so different from you that at first all you can do is wonder, despair or be shocked.

Occasionally, however, something happens when you immerse yourself in this work and let yourself be torn by it. You begin to realize that the very situations that are so impossible can also be your greatest teachers.

This is a momentous event. The Western tradition can accept individuals, objects or pieces of land as potentially sacred. But groups? No. Process? Not yet. But the very groups that are so resistant, so strident and so rigid turn out to be your spiritual mentors. They not only tear you asunder, they teach you not facts and theories, but awareness and openness to the impossible. You transform with them. You no longer think of yourself as a facilitator but as a learner — even a devotee of What Is.

This in itself signifies that a crucial lesson has been completed. Community is not only your worst problem but also your most sacred teacher.

NOTE

1. Einstein, *The Meaning of Relativity*, p. 2.