

Facilitating Group Work On The Hero's Journey Intensive

HJ Apprentice Training 2022

Facilitating Intensive Group Work

Turning to One Another

There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about.

Ask “What’s possible?” not “What’s wrong?”

Keep asking.

Notice what you care about.

Assume that many others share your dreams.

Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters.

Talk to people you know.

Talk to people you don’t know.

Talk to people you never talk to.

Be intrigued by the differences you hear.

Expect to be surprised.

Treasure curiosity more than certainty.

Invite in everybody who cares to work on what’s possible.

Acknowledge that everyone is an expert about something.

Know that creative solutions come from new connections.

Remember, you don’t fear people whose story you know.

Real listening always brings people closer together.

Trust that meaningful conversations can change your world.

Rely on human goodness.

Stay together.

—Margaret Wheatley



Exploring Intensive Group Work Embedded Within The Hero's Journey Myth:

1 - The Group Itself As The Ultimate Element

Time limited, intensive group work, conducted in nature settings and framed by the myth of the Hero's Journey, can engage the type of depth processes that require deep, personal working alliances among group members. It creates the conditions for encounters that can develop a group member's capacities for self-examination, allowing them to question their fixed ways of being.

This type of group work requires each of its members to deepen into a felt sense of one's own interior, and to bear the dynamic tension of physical sensations experienced in their bodies as they enter into the unknown together.

As group practitioners on this path, we look for opportunities to enter the troubledness of mind and body that our participants will bring to the group, in both conscious and unconscious ways.

- *Areas of trouble are be seen and taken up as areas of greatest potential for growth.*

These areas of 'trouble' will be the inevitable pathways that surface along the journey, when the conditions for proper adventures and worthy ordeals are right, and when people feel safe enough to take necessary risks, or disturbed enough to cut loose from their well established and self-limiting patterns.

These areas of trouble will also re-create impasses to be resolved, often in areas of their lives that they might be least likely to look at clearly and directly. At the same time, others will be compellingly drawn into their re-enactments – especially so in groups, and precisely when dynamic tension comes forth between group members.

Of course, as group practitioners, we venture into these areas with curiosity, respect, a sense of exploration – as these very areas of trouble that are lying in wait will be in the most need of thoughtful attention and genuine interest.

In this type of intensive group work, an important understanding must be established - that the group itself, along with the facilitators, will eventually be invited into – or will stumble into - the most troubled and most vulnerable areas of a group participant's life.

Our way of working with this understanding requires the willingness to bear necessary risk, and allowing for uncertainty to surface and be sustained – for the individual bringing forth their trouble, and for the group that must bear it, and for the group facilitators who hold the process for all group members, and for the group itself.

It is within these areas of trouble and difficulty that some of the most important learnings of

the journey participants' life will take place, if only the group facilitators can help the group (and themselves) to avoid the following:

- *A reflexive impulse to provide answers.*
- *An immediate entry into a problem solving mode.*
- *A collusion with fixing and caretaking responses.*

These defensive postures are usually the first (and unexamined) group responses to the inevitable difficulties and tensions that will arise in one of its group members.

Any or all of these positions will either forestall or foreclose the deepening process, which requires the group members to bear the uncertainty and the unforesee-ability of the unknown to present itself.

The function and role of the facilitators, when working with a group on a time-limited intensive, is to provide a unique and creative spaciousness, one that invites authentic relationship with each other, and one that allows new possibilities to arise, so that all the group members can finally explore aspects of their lives that they have often overlooked or avoided – and at last, can have the right trouble in mind.

We understand that by living into the myth that awakens for each of us along the journey, each person must tolerate, and eventually accept these troubled places within one's self, and make a place for the trouble to exist in the presence of the other group members.

Of course, this no easy task, but we can be assured it is likely to be deeply intimate and rewarding – but only if the group (and the group facilitators) can bear it and withstand the trouble, and keep staying with each other in the vulnerability of the uncertain outcomes.



2 - What Might Happen In The Group That Is Unlikely To Happen Anywhere Else

The conversations that take place in this type of group work are intended to be fresh and unique – likely to have never occurred before, for the group participants. If they have occurred before, the conversations now need to point towards new possibilities and new outcomes.

It is not important how an essential conversation gets started – it needs to happen one way or another. They can go well or go poorly at first. This is not what is important. It is far more important to explore how an essential conversation – one that engages with a dynamic and embodied tension - can be sustained, and how it can move things forward in a group, and thus, how it ends up is what matters most – especially for the group as a whole.

- *We always keep in mind the fundamental group question, “What can be spoken and heard here that cannot be spoken and heard anywhere else in our lives?”*

This essential question is like a compass heading that informs and guides the group at all times, pointing towards giving language to the truth of each person’s lived experiences. It authorizes each person in the group to speak at last to the areas of their life that have often been put on hold, or held in silence.

These life-long silences and chronic patterns of withholding have often been necessary to protect the group members as they faced their early life suffering from life’s inevitable and unbearable difficulties – and the subsequent disappointment, shame, and sense of failure that life too often brings, and that many in a group have become over-identified with. This is what must begin to come undone in the group itself, all together.

- *Individuals can look within themselves and can reflect about themselves in the presence of other group members, in a way that can make their own minds more available to them, and provide them with more clarity.*

The felt sense of energetic containment that takes place in an effective and sustained group process can help its group members see themselves more clearly, especially when there is enough silence and spaciousness happening within a group. The group’s depth of presence can help its individuals to metabolize and digest their experiences of self and other in the group.

- *Individual group members can also feel into themselves more deeply when they can be embodied and aware while in the presence of other group members.*

There is a way that the embodied presence and mindful awareness of the group as a whole can create the essential conditions for its individual group members to feel into their own depths, in a manner that goes beyond any words or any particular conceptual understanding.

In the act of witnessing of others, and of being witnessed by others in one’s being, a group member can feel a part of the group’s field of wholeness, and at the same time, deeply individuated and in touch with their own unique and embodied self.

This supports what Winnicott called ‘*going on being*’, and this deeply felt experience of self can be greatly calming and reassuring, affirming in one’s deepest being the reality of their own existence.



3 - Renewed Vitality - A Boon To Be Discovered Through the Group Adventure/Ordeal

Every person’s protective silence comes at a cost to their individuality and their vitality. The vitality of the true self is often gradually muted and sometimes suffocated over the course of a

lifetime; the true self requires self-scrutiny, the interest of others, and new acts of courage. This is precisely what our intensive group work is to be in service of.

- *The restoration of the vitality of the self is at the heart of the journey process; it is a part of the boon that is to be discovered, like the pearl beyond all price, while being an active and engaged member in a group.*
- *Intensive, in-depth group work, in heroic way of the journey myth, can provide the group with a vital base for inner work that is challenging, unpredictable, honest, and lively.*
- *The Hero's Journey myth provides the group with an essential process that gives them distinct opportunities to face and bear what those who have gone before them had found unbearable and unspeakable.*

At some point along their journey - or perhaps at many points – each group member will have to choose between the uncertainties and vulnerabilities of living life more fully, or receding into the more familiar and deadening security of life-long habits and defenses.

The benefits and outcomes of a meaningful journey are not simply that of symptom relief, or a return to what used to be. It is more about a process of moving life forward, of psychic growth that allows each person to become other than what they already know themselves to be.

The group process is all about developing the capacity to surrender into and remain engaged in the flow and feeling of becoming a 'life-force-in-motion', in the face of all of the journey's inevitable vicissitudes, wonders, uncertainties, joys, and sorrows.



4 - Crossing The Threshold I - What Am I Getting Myself Into?

Once one has fully entered into a few enlivening encounters during a Journey's group process that is designed to be sustained through its own depth and intensity, this question is never far away from a group member's mind. It is the question that surfaces when the group's internal temperature rises, and a dynamic tension establishes itself in the bodies and minds of the participants and the facilitators.

The arising of this very question provides validation that the journey process has taken over, the ego is no longer in charge, and something interesting is about to unfold.

The Journey will present group members with opportunities to learn new relational skills and new humanizing capacities, offering each person the possibility of being the authors of a new story, and not just someone endlessly caught in a script written by someone else.

A worthwhile and meaningful journey is always a product of insightful learning, fostered by the group's interest in and support of each participant's particular adventures and ordeals.

Much hinges on the group's collective ability to accompany and engage each individual while they are in the thick of what troubles them most. This is precisely why a solidly contained group experience is so important, so potentially threatening, and therefore, so valuable.

The journey intensive provides a vehicle that allows group members to engage in respectful scrutiny of how and why they do what they always tend to do. The group facilitator's job is to stand simultaneously inside and outside of this dynamic as it develops.

To make a meaningful change in one's life can seem insurmountable to a group member when they are in their deepest place of vulnerability and need.

Wishes for a life with less of the most familiar difficulties, and instead, striving for a life with new meaning and new aliveness, will inevitably be a challenge to sustain. Any real work in the service of moving one's life forward in new ways will be accompanied by feelings of fear, insecurity, frustration and inadequacy, along with one's own personal hauntings of past failures in relationships, and rejections by others.

- *Moving beyond one's scripts will requires group members to discover new people in their lives that have a greater range of life skills than those in their families of origin had.*
- *Group members need time to adjust to new relational possibilities, ones that allow them to discover that the group is a resource they can make good use of.*



4 - Crossing the Threshold II – Orienting Toward The Unknown

As mentioned earlier, group members will at some point have to enter a necessary sense of risk and bear the uncertainty of unfolding, here-and-now moments with their group, once they set aside the well-worn tracks of their life scripts. *They must come face-to-face with the unknown that happens in the group.*

- *Every group member will have to become more tolerant of the unknown. As well, each group member needs the opportunity to discover that others can be teachers of new ways of interacting and being.*

Throughout the process of the Journey, the group facilitator becomes oriented to creating an environment that differs from the participant's life scripts. They must consistently point towards a future that holds possibilities beyond what is most assumed or expected.



5 - How The Group Facilitator Can Stumble in the Dark Forest of the Helper's Psyche

Attempting to facilitate a group can become an elaborate effort to compensate for the failures, neglect, or harm done by one's own parents – and to fall into the dark trap of proving oneself as being better for others than what their parents were for them.

As facilitators for the group, it is difficult to communicate how compelling the fantasy of becoming 'the good helper' can be, especially when one is unconsciously motivated by a wish to escape one's own pained and self.

We must recognize how frequently a facilitator can become motivated by unconscious needs to demonstrate their goodness, to eagerly show their capacity to care, and to reflexively express their willingness to be there to help others, especially as tensions emerge in a group.

We all have fantasies of compensation and repair that originate from the childhood wounds we each have experienced. But all too often, these tend to go unexamined and unquestioned.

As group facilitators, the reparative fantasies we carry can not only be a compensation for our own childhood wounds, they can also express a defiance of our parental failures, and can be an effort at the undoing of ways that others failed us.

It is important to recognize how the fantasy of '*the good parent substitute*' or the 'pseudo-parent' can effectively inhibit the psychological growth and maturation of our group members, especially as it pertains to fully entering the necessary trials and ordeals of the Journey process.

I have seen this phenomenon subtly undermine group dynamics many times over the years, and it is useful to address this directly as part of a facilitator's preparation process for group intensives.



6 - Boundary Setting For the Group Facilitator

We certainly need to create safety for our group participants, not only so that they can stay safe, but so that they feel safe enough to take the necessary risks that life will invariably ask of them.

One crucial function in establishing a sense of safety for group members is learning to hold a particular kind of separateness from each group member's experience. This boundary creates a certain distance from the group member's perceptions about themselves and from the stories

they tell. This makes the necessary space the facilitator needs for observing and thinking clearly for themselves.

The distance created by holding a separate mind does not convey indifference and does not create an unbridgeable chasm, like we may have experienced with our own parents. In fact, it is quite the opposite. It is an important way to model what each participant needs to do for themselves.

Holding the boundary of a separate mind also allows the group member to discover that their perceptions and feelings about us, whether positive or negative in nature, do not injure nor destroy us. Once this realization has been made, we can establish a more substantive and authentic way of being in relationship with them, as a separate other.

Establishing a clear and felt sense of an individuated self, that stands apart from our group member's projections onto us, helps the group to better discern real care and relatedness from states of *merger*. Being merged with another's experience may initially feel good, but it also communicates an indiscriminate and undifferentiated care, where one or both person's sense of self disappears in the connection.



7 - Working With Generative vs Destructive Aggression

- *What we cannot do positively, we will only do negatively.*

Winnicott emphasized the infant's need for ruthlessness in relation to the mother – the infant's capacities for aggression in service of getting one's most essential needs met – and the mother's capacity to tolerate and receive her child's aggression. As well, the mother must learn to tolerate her own occasional fears and furies at being consumed by this dependent creature.

Fundamental to Winnicott's understanding of psychological development was the child's need to psychologically attack the mother – not to hurt or destroy her – but to test and prove her ability to survive the attacks and stay invested in the baby's well-being.

- *Aggression and conflict on the part of the developing child were, in fact, expressions of hatred at moments, but also of the confidence and hope that mother will neither collapse nor disappear.*

In this way, the mother proves herself to be a person different from, and independent of, the child's fantasies that "you are mine and must care for me forever".

In Winnicott's view, these fundamental encounters between mother and child were essential

for the emergence of the child's mind and for the child's discovery of the right to, and the pleasure in, having a mind of one's own.

In the same way, as group facilitators, we must have the ability to offer a space for each group members to have his or her own mind, a mind different from the mind that we hold.

When the group, contained and grounded by the steadying presence of the group facilitator, can receive a hostile expression from one of its members, and can welcome periods of conflict and disagreement that need no immediate resolution – without either conceding or punishing – a new relational space can be opened.

In this new space, the individual's experience of their own mind and way of being can be established and lived, distinct from that of the others in the group.

- *One's mind can become newly alive in the respectful, engaged, and differentiated presence of the group's otherness. This can be a radical developmental shift for a group member to have.*

This fundamental shift is needed to bring an aspect of one's true self into genuine relationship with others, birthed by the capacities of the group. This is another boon to be experienced by the group members during their journey, once the group facilitator has a solid understanding of working with aggressive life force.



8 - Becoming An Enlivening & Disturbing Force In Service Of Life

The British analyst Christopher Bollas emphasized that the therapist's tasks included the need at times to soothe and contain a client's distress, but there was also a parallel responsibility to unsettle and disturb.

This will be a most essential piece of learning for the group facilitator - especially when attempting to bring the group into potentially transformative territories. Being a disturbing force re-shapes and re-defines the facilitator's role and place in the group. By being a model of positive life force, the facilitator demonstrates what is possible within the group.

Having group members simply comply with us, or defer to us, gives us a sense of comfort and control as facilitators, but it doesn't do a person much good in the long run, especially if they can't feel free to challenge life's structures, limits and rules, by the ways they challenge us.

There is a vitality to interpersonal encounters and exchanges that take place in a group, whenever the group becomes strong enough to contain the differences they have with one

another, while also staying interested in one another, and caring for one another. This is remarkably enlivening and enriching territory for a group to hold.

It is especially important how a group learns to hold hurts and misunderstandings, and make adjustments to their ways of relating to one another, without regressing too deeply into shame or guilt when mistakes are made, or imperfection in a person's humanity arises.

- *The goal is to get genuinely differentiated minds into the same group space – minds that are able to be in disagreement, but also able to be interested in one another's thinking.*



9 - Working With the Past in the Present – Transference & Emotional Reactions

When a group member's unfinished business shows up in the group (as it inevitably will), the past comes alive in the present, and the present has an opportunity to come more fully alive through the echoes of the past.

- *Unconscious domains of experience make themselves known and felt through transference communications, which will almost always involve feelings that are stronger than the current reality warrants.*

A group facilitator can learn to see how a group member's habitual character defense will 'push others around' within the group experience – unconsciously shaping the group, telling the group something they can't yet speak.

We can experience and understand the force of a transference's intensity as a more primitive means of relating – sometimes limiting and deforming, *always informing*, and hopefully, re-forming into a new possibility that would not emerge otherwise.

There are times when the emergence of strong emotional reactions from group participants will be totally unexpected, even though in retrospect there may have been unspoken signs of this coming forth, all along the way.

- *When working with strong emotional reactions, we can learn to simply describe and reflect the intensity of the reaction back to a group member. We don't have to actually do anything about their reactions.*

In fact, we don't even have to try to make anything better, we don't need to be overly reassuring, we don't have to comfort them, and we don't need to take the edge off their struggle.

The facilitator does their best to describe what is happening to them, what is happening between them and the group, or what is happening between them and ourselves, in a straightforward manner.

The facilitator often must enter the client's emotional storms and feel their intense emotional experiences - *withstanding them* – and then the facilitator can simply attempt to put words to what they are experiencing in that storm. This is no easy task, but one that must be modeled to the group to show what is possible.

- *It is the facilitator's job to get the various group members to communicate in this manner as well.*

Sometimes, a certain individual will bring forth a necessary challenge or attack on the group itself, to force a developmental shift among the relationships happening (or not happening) in the group.

Can we as facilitators withstand this attack, and recognize the growth opportunity being rendered?

Otherwise, the tendency for the facilitator (or the group) will be to make nice, take the edge off, and merge with the individual's experience or projection? Or might the facilitator (or the group) further the conflict by defending their position by explaining themselves better to the individual, or by letting the group attacking back with emotional escalations? Or might the facilitator shut down because of all the energy being used to manage their internal reactions?

Amid an individual's emotion storm, what is at stake is always the vital question: "*What can become possible between group members, now that someone has become noticeably disturbed by someone else?*"

The hope is that the inevitable emotional reaction – or re-enactment - from a group member can finally be experienced as something other than hostage-taking hostility or something painfully ruinous.

- *We can stay aware that an emotional reaction is most likely an unconscious attempt on the part of one group member to create a new and transformative space within themselves - and perhaps within the group – for something which has been long shut off or denied.*



10 - Moving Beyond Old Patterns of Withdrawal & Isolation

A commonly reactive stance among group members is using their personal sense of isolation, or their habitual pattern of withdrawal, to unconsciously ward themselves off from the depths of their fears in a group – especially the fear of being in real relationship.

Helping a group learn how to receive these types of transferential communications is not comfortable or comforting, and it is often quite disturbing. But these challenging encounters also hold the potential to become quite enlivening and life-enriching for many, if not all, group members.


Again, this is what the journey is all about - and it hinges on the group facilitator's ability to be a withstanding force as well as a disturbing force, all in support of the experience of 'life force in motion' within the group.



11 - Group Facilitators – Allies As Active Witnesses

The group facilitator must commit to being as fully present to the moment as they can, in order to listen not just with their ears, but with their whole body – *self as instrument*.

The facilitator must have the capacity to embody themselves fully enough to sit in a circle with other bodies in an actively receptive and reflective silence, allowing what they hear to move through them, and to allow space for this reflective silence to awaken their minds and enliven their bodies.

 *The group facilitator must have the ability to metabolize and process within their own interior what is happening in the group.*

As the troubled spaces that live inside the various group members begin to come more animated within themselves and is felt within the group, the old meanings of the individual member's anxieties and vulnerabilities will inevitably begin to surface.

If things can progress, they can become articulate and be shared, and the process can develop. As group members further their exchanges with one another, the group members' experience can begin to take on new meanings.

Group members can come to appreciate why they feel so anxious, or so vulnerable to the perceived rejection of others, for example. They can question and explore what makes them so expectant of and ready for rejection.

Once they can begin to reflect in this way, their emotional reactions are less likely to be automatically stamped and defined as sure signs of others' disinterest in them, or as clear indications that others want to reject them (which they may have had to endure, over and over

again, most likely in shamed silence, earlier in their lives).

- *Essential to working through deep anxieties and chronic inner conflicts is the ability to call a group member's thinking and perspective into question. At other times, it will be important to call the group's thinking into question.*

A group member is mostly likely to become more able to see things in new ways when they can experience themselves *being witnessed* – actively being both contained and reflected by the group – in ways their own thinking cannot do for them.



12 - Groups Help Individuals Learn to See From Multiple Perspectives

It is important to have the ability to see and feel our own histories from multiple perspectives. Groups are an ideal place to do this, as many different perspectives are readily available, when the group is active and engaged with one another.

We all need to have a healthy respect for the unbearable aspects of our parents lives that they themselves have had to ward off at all costs. We need to have a regard for the frailties of being human, and for the almost inevitable falling short that parents do, with their children.

- *There is a profound intimacy and freedom to be had when we can recognize the realities, including the limitations and frailties, of another human being, and of the generations that have proceeded us.*

A vital self is a self that can bear the disappointments and limitations of those we need, love and desire, while continuing to care about them, and while continuing to move towards the world and those around us.

A vital self is willing to create and sustain a life in the world in spite of, and in the midst of, ongoing frustration, opposition and uncertainty, that life inevitably holds in store for each of us along the way.

Group members are most likely to call into question old ways that feel like fixed realities to them, when they are also aware that these old ways just don't work.

Whenever group members recognize that they have active witnesses - others who have moved beyond the need to help or fix a group member, or to try and coax them into a change they aren't yet ready for – they can open up to the possibility of new perspectives.

Facilitators who can stay curious and interested in their group members, without making any

one person do anything about being the object of interest, can create the necessary space where new possibilities can be considered, and group members can simply co-exist together in the unknown, building towards fresh potential, and for new ways of living to emerge.



The preceding reflections, and notes have emerged from my own clinical experiences with wilderness based group work, and are integrated into the Hero's Journey® teachings of Joseph Campbell.

They have been critically enhanced as well by Bill Cornell's ongoing work. Significant content has been liberally taken, with permission, from William Cornell's most recent book:

SELF EXAMINATION IN PSYCHOANALYSIS & PSYCHOTHERAPY: COUNTERTRANSFERENCE & SUBJECTIVITY IN CLINICAL PRACTICE; Routledge Press, New York & London, 2019.