Chapter 3 – Learning & Hating in Groups

When participating in groups, we have to address the more vulnerable and disorganizing position of group membership, especially regarding the considerable effort it can take to mature among others without being harmed or stunted.

In group work, after establishing the necessary sense of safety, one wants to establish an atmosphere or 'field' that offers an implicit permission to provoke, play, disagree, and make the kind of trouble that is worth having.

There is implicit permission to think and freedom to discover, and speak the wisdom one already knows or is capable of embodying, no matter one's 'qualifications'.

In groups, this kind of license can be refreshingly alive and freeing; it allows greater diversity of opinion and contribution and thus greater potential for learning.

Doing personal work in groups normalizes the troubles many of us face, and models a process for moving forward through those troubles.

Group work can demonstrate that individuals have a capacity to grow, and to outgrow problematic behavior, while framing that potential within realistic limits. In groups, this can offer a sense of hope without promoting an illusion that proves unsupportable in the larger world.

There are also issues and dynamics that can interfere with learning and growth, especially in groups, such as:
- Infantilization of certain group members.
- Intellectualization of psychological work.
- Pathologizing difficult human experiences.
- Flying into action before sitting with and grasping the real trouble.

Groups can be intensely irrational, unthinking, reactive and distorting places.

Defensive Styles in Groups

We can withdraw by cutting off, pulling back or silently sulking when things don't go our way; we can lose track of ourselves and what we are trying to learn or get from a group; we can become involved in controlling or over-functioning for a group.

When we withdraw our presence from the group, we also withdraw from and abandon our own growth potential and sense of self.

When we participate in groups, we most often cannot really say we are in any actual danger; we just find ourselves orienting to the group *as if* we are, delusionally. This dramatically shapes how our exchanges and encounters turn out.

When we are overly prone to withdrawal or retreat tendencies, we enact the consequences of the slow and gradual crippling effect of that behavior pattern, that comes from the illusion of safety through disconnection.

Yet if we do not figure out how to be with others, in community, or as part of an extended family, we would not fully become ourselves.

- *Becoming ourselves is as much a product of communal processes as of individual effort, character or genetics, and there is a certain integrity to be discovered through vigorous interactions with others.*

- *One purpose of forming, joining, and adjusting to groups is to prevent biologic, psychological and also moral deterioration. Few people are able to 'recharge their own batteries', lift themselves up by their own psychological bootstraps, and keep their own morals trimmed without outside assistance. (Berne)*

But what if we have a hard time making use of that outside assistance?

Hatred is one key aspect of group life that we must often face.

- *It is clear that when a group forms the individuals forming it hope to achieve some satisfaction from it. It is also clear that the first thing they are aware of is a sense of frustration produced by the presence of the group of which they are members. (Bion)*

We all are likely to enjoy being within a group's aliveness, with its sense of variety and dynamic flow – we all do not have to work so hard under these conditions.

But there is also the flip side of a group's aliveness – the boredom of the group's resolute avoidance, the tensions of conflicting wishes and agendas, the threat of being killed off or humiliated, the passivity of group members, the entrenched attitudes and behaviors, the slowness of deliberation when making a group decision, the magnification of meanness, and a sense of any effort being fruitless.

When we bring along issues of belonging (and who doesn't), we can feel a panicky discomfort upon entry into the group, which leads to a heightened sense of feeling too different from the others.

Frustration, uncertainty, contagion, threat – how often in groups do we find ourselves facing these kind of psychological sinkholes?

It can also be easy to disown a group, and blame them as if we have no role in how they behave and function.

- *"The individual cannot help being a member of a group even if his or her membership…consists in behaving in such a way as to give reality to the idea that he or she does not belong to a group at all." (Berne)*

There is also the intolerance of being wrong when we are in a group. We affect a group when we cannot relinquish what we think, especially upon hearing something that contradicts or corrects our view or misperception.

We contribute negatively to a group's culture when we have trouble opening our minds to 'not knowing' while in the midst of trying and failing to know.

- *There is no detached way of understanding groups from the position of objective observer. Groups have to be understood in terms of one's own personal experience of participating with others in the co-creation of the patterns of interactions that are the group. (Stacey & Griffin)*

Groups can also devolve into a collective mindlessness or 'groupthink' and feel quite brain-less, compared to that of a single human being with a thoughtful mind.

When Groups Can Think

When individual group members can think and learn, this clearly stimulates and supports the thinking and learning of other individuals in that group. That produces a cognitive-like process that is greater than just the sum of those individual intelligences. *Something comes into existence that is not exclusively the product of the individuals involved.*

Intelligence emerges, sometimes stunningly, when individuals in a group use their own minds as separate beings. It emerges when a group is containing its diversity, knowledge and anxiety rather than pushing it out.

For individuals to learn and grow and work as a group, they must find and share their own embodied minds. This kind of thoughtful and compassionate presence and ethical relating can spread through a group as contagiously as anxiety and mob behavior.

One value of group work is certainly those moments when everyone is struggling to understand a complex problem, thinking in parallel, and speaking with some thoughtfulness or intuition. Yet is not easy to arrive at these moments.

We can witness a growing clarity come into a group when group members are offering their differing opinions and perceptions, and letting them all be on the table.

This expands our frames of references, and accelerates the process, and helps to metabolize, as a group, what one person can't think of by themselves.

Personal meaning is enriched when it is continually informed, interrupted by, and conversant with this kind of collective emotional and communicative process.

When we can listen to one another with all our senses, we begin to learn the contours of our collective struggle, perhaps eventually find a name for it, and a place in our larger, shared field of meaning.

These are the extraordinary moments in group life when people become capable of reconciling complexities that had seemed intractable just moments before.

Groups that encourage the elaboration of certain common life struggles and in which the voicing of multiple perspectives begins to contruct a palpable sense of well-being and connection.

In certain group experiences, we will not be able to find such clarity. Instead we can hold these questions:
- *In the midst of the group's process and content, how can I remain alert to my own mind and aspirations? Can I figure out what I want and can realistically get from what is happening?*
- *In a group that seems to be 'wasting its time' – what is my responsibility? Is the uselessness an impasse or just the disorganization that often precedes a breakthrough? What must I change with how I am contributing?*
- *When I am silent, what is my function for the group? Containing? Listening? Incubating? Mulling? Binding the group's anxiety?*
- *When 'the air' is filled with knowing and conclusiveness, would it be entirely useless to admit I do not understand what is happening?*

As the group facilitator, it is useful to consider these questions:
- *Why am I sitting in this room?*
- *Why am I not home, or being instead wherever else I might dictate?*
- *What will this hour contribute to my unfolding?*

Also:
- *How do I manage my internal reactions in the midst of the group's process?*
- *How do I manage to not coerce anyone else into doing anything?*
- *How do I manage to not control the group?*
- *How do I manage to bear my own frustrations?*

The ability to understand one's self as a group member, and growing into maturing as a result of making contributions to a group as a member, helps to shape the capacity for group leadership and facilitation.

In this regard, it is useful to understand group leadership as a secondary property or phenomenon, one that emerges from group membership.

- *A group member who is able to manage himself or herself has the potential to become a natural group leader, one who is also able to follow.*

Why Bother With Groups

- *Personal despair, and despair about being in a group, go hand in hand. The experience of working in a demoralized group is not very different from the experience of the client who has come to the end of the road with his or her life. (Hinshelwood)*

We bother with groups, and with our discomfort with being in them, because we are keenly interested in their potential for learning, and for collective struggle and elaboration in relation to certain key problems.

It may be surprising or even unsettling to realize the extent to which our lives, if they are to be fully lived, require some relation to groups. Most (not all) of us live better when we are in contact with others in groups, regardless of the anxiety we have about them.

Going forward, these questions bear further reflection:
- *How does our membership in groups affect what we hope to achieve in life?*
- *What hopes do we have for our groups and their members?*
- *What could we change about how we participate and contribute in groups?*

Perhaps it is simply a matter of recognizing that living a meaningful life makes groups unavoidable to us; perhaps we grow better when we are group members. Perhaps we can care less about whether or not we do or do not like them.

- *What if we can allow ourselves to passionately want what only a group can give to our pursuit of a meaningful life that can move forward?*