

Facilitating Aliveness in The Group Container

Based on the work of Rachel Peltz
for the HJAP Training Group



*A Chickpea leaps almost over the rim
Of the pot
Where it is being boiled.*

“Why are you doing this to me?”

The cook knocks it down with the ladle.

*“Don’t you try to jump out.
You think I’m torturing you;*

I’m giving you flavor,

*So you can mix with spices and rice
And be the lovely vitality
Of a human being.*

*Remember when you drank
Rain in the garden?*

That was for this.”

*Grace first. Sexual pleasure,
Then a boiling new life begins,
And the Friend has something
Good to eat.*

*Eventually
The chickpea will say to the cook,*

*“Boil me some more.
Hit me with the skimming spoon.
I can’t do this by myself...”*

*You’re my cook, my driver,
My way into existence.
I love your cooking.”*

-Rumi

Activating Aliveness Through The Therapeutic Encounter

We can think about the aspect of therapeutic challenge in group work as a *'bringing to life'* aspect of what a therapist's function is to be.

There is to be an emphasis to be placed on activating a *vitalizing presence* within the group's therapeutic space, which supports both a *'transformation in action'* and a *'transformation of being'*, in which we as therapists 'use all there is to use' to establish emotional contact with our group members.

We will look at various ways that illustrate the need to establish aliveness within a group space, a palpable 'present-moment intimacy', something that feels *'enfleshed'* and can be felt by the facilitator and group members alike.

These vitalizing encounters providing fleeting moments of aliveness that can animate our souls. They make the living of our lives worthwhile; they hold the "truth" of our innermost flashes of life, what the writer James Wood calls 'life-surplus'.

Aliveness Is In The Details

"If the life of a story is in its excess, its surplus...then it can also be said that the life-surplus of a story lies in its details, for details represent those moments in a story where form is outlived, cancelled, evaded. I think of details as nothing less than bits of life sticking out of the frieze of form, imploring us to touch them."

- James Wood

We must keep in mind that underneath it all, our group members are also imploring us to reach them, to touch them. We aim to zero in on opportunities to register this 'life-surplus' as it surfaces in a one-to-one encounter that happens in a group, and to consider how this aliveness serves to establish a way of being – the new ground of being – in the potential space of the group.

- *Only from this alive ground of being can we approach the client's more treacherous and haunted internal spaces.*

Where are we within ourselves when we feel most alive? What are we attuning to within ourselves, and with our clients, that allows a vitalizing exchange takes place? What exactly are we presencing?

Stepping In To Move Things Forward

We can think of these vitalizing encounters as being contained initially by the body and mind of the facilitator, and eventually, by the body and mind of the client, and between the facilitator, each group member, and the group as a whole.

We must become aware of our responsibility to, at certain times, *come forward more*, especially at first, to demonstrate a 'new possibility encounter' with a group member. The worst thing that can happen is that we will be wrong with what we have said or done.

- *By stepping into this forward moving stance, we make a conscious decision that it is more important that our presence is felt than it is that our intervention is right.*

We are intending for a form of engagement that generates presences in the face of all of life's inevitable absences. We are showing what is possible.

We are living in times in which we are being called upon to engage in the *life-giving and life-affirming dimensions* of our lives, and this now an increasing point of emphasis in our approach to our individual work.

As facilitators in a group, we are also shifting from the metaphor of 'digging' to enter our depths – to becoming keenly receptive, enhancing, and amplifying – and by doing so, actuating what is happening for our group members.

Emergence From Shared Lived Experience

Some of us have historically been trained to try to 'explain' things to our clients, and we focus too much on the causes of what troubles people – explaining to people *why* they are the way they are.

Our task is to shift towards attending much more closely to the *lived experiences* of being with our clients – moment by moment, session by session – cultivating an engaged and more directly observed, shared experience, rather than reverting to an *explanatory* approach.

- *When we can be more descriptive in our approach, it helps to vitalize what is happening in one-to-one encounters in the therapeutic dyad.*

Rather than seeking explanations and trying to 'understand', from a more distant and observing position, we want to shift the emphasis to 'entering into' the field of the relating that is taking place – to move in close – keeping our awareness on what we have entered, and to what it stirs in us.

- *At certain moments, we will have to insert ourselves with our clients in a very real and embodied way.*

What is a vitalizing presence?

- *A vitalizing presence is a presence that momentarily awakens the most rudimentary capacity in a person to feel alive as her/himself.*

Winnicott says that in each baby, there is a *vital spark*, and an urge towards life and growth and development that is part of the baby, something the child is born with, which is carried forward in a way that we do not have to understand.

- *This is a deeply personal, felt indwelling, an experiencing of one's own sense of oneself in one's body, in the world.*

Winnicott had an abiding concern for the *urge towards life* and with the deadness that results from failures to create and discover a world that can tolerate one's own aliveness.

Establishing A Place Of Mattering

In our group facilitation work, we have all come across a person who is caught up in the context of their often drama and trauma-filled, chaotic family and social worlds. We immediately register the direness they carry – and the visceral necessity of establishing vital emotional contact with another.

At the same time, we know about the difficulty they have doing exactly that.

As we facilitate the client's process, we also track, acutely notice, sense, and accompany a person who is feeling challenged or threatened by the group's presence (or the facilitator's presence in an interaction).

We can speak to these individuals simply and directly. We can keep our comments close to what we are directly experiencing by being together with them.

By doing so, a sense of place is being established. We are making room for them to have their own experience while being sensed, steadied and held – even enveloped – gently and firmly, in a manner that they can tolerate, while in the group.

This is a place of immediate and present co-habitation, of embodied and timeless presence, where everything 'is what it is' – a place *before* the capacity to inquire (and thus constitute one's presence as a person in time) is attained.

When we are being present to our group members, we use our words, but fundamentally we are acutely and 'attentively' perceiving, receiving and sensing in the hope of establishing a place in time where, despite all that has or has not happened in their lives, a *new* place can be established, where the 'face' of this person can show itself.

This state of acute sensitivity and perception we try to reach in ourselves is *as desperate as it is ordinary*.

In the instances when a group member's early life was dominated by the absence of a maternally occupied presence, our primary task is to be innocuously and unobtrusively establish such a presence in the space that we share with them, as individuals and as a group.

- *This is how we begin to establish the ground of mattering, which is born from a spirit of vital personalization.*

It is precisely this spirit that fosters in people the sense that they *can*, that they can experience their own ableness in the world, that they can sense their capacity to be and live in the world.

This rudimentary sense of one's embodied self, in the presence of others, is everything. It depends on the environment's ability to meet the person where they are, to 'seriously notice' them, to see them into their existence in and of the social world.

- *This being 'seriously noticed' says 'Hey! You matter!' It is a vitalizing presence that allows for a person to feel alive in the world.*

Holding vs Containing

There is a critical distinction between Winnicott's notion of holding and Bion's notion of containing. Holding is about *being*; containing is about *thinking*. There is a complex relationship between these two functions.

This active holding dimension – the focused, attentive, awakening dimension of environmental holding is a type of 'firm handling' – is to be provided by the therapist and the group members as an 'witnessing others'.

Making 'Unsaturated' Interpretations

These are straightforward and direct interpretations that are hearable and usable, that expand what can be felt, and don't trigger the defenses of the person to whom they are addressed.

They represent a move toward a more proactive vitalization in the interpersonal field between speaker and listeners.

These types of interpretations join with a client where they are, in the language that they tend to speak, including no language at all, or a language of the non-verbal, which includes their rhythms, gestures, and expressions.

We, as facilitating agents, learn how to join with our group members in a *medium* that best captures their imaginations, and embodied, vital sensibility in group work.

Without this embodied and vitalizing sensibility in our communications, our words will often fall flat, lacking the ‘music’ that animates a vital exchange.

We must be mindful our own ‘love of language’, and not overuse words when offering interpretations, which can diminish other forms of communication, such as tone of voice, facial expressions, bodily gestures, etc.

Speaking & Hearing the Truth

“Why is it then, that a truth exists that we believe we cannot tolerate on our own, yet, when another person properly interprets this truth to us – employing the right timing and dosage – we experience relief?”

When we are able to hear from someone whose perspective we can rely on and make use of, this is a kind of ‘*vouchsafing*’ – a transference of trust - that is a form of containment, and this may be the ultimate meaning of containment.

This is no small task.

This ability to feel safe in being able to receive an observation from another person, captures the essential ground of being in our group work. This is the essential grounding level needed for making contact with one another.

The capacity to tell one’s story, or speak one’s truth, rests on being able to experience and internalize the embodied and engaging ‘story-holding’ and ‘truth-holding’ presences of others.

A New Ground For Experiencing and Meaning Making

This involves moving beyond dualistic ways of being and thinking that separate body from mind, subject from object, internal worlds from external worlds.

When we split the body from the mind’s operations, we tend to privilege the mind’s representational contents of perception from the body’s sensate experiences, we make what is in the mind even more ‘real’ than the world we experience, or our immediate relations with others.

We must keep in mind that our perception of something is always in the middle of something else, it always forms a part of a *field*. Even our most basic perceptions are complex relational events, always identified against a larger field.

We can broaden our concept of *dreaming* (or storytelling) from a private, intrapsychic event to one that includes the body, and to think of how this sort of dreaming may *disclose* the world rather than *represent* or explain it.

Disclosures vs Foreclosures

What is the difference between a dream (or story) that discloses and a dream (or story) that represents?

A dream that discloses illuminates what has been unconscious in the dreamer. The dream itself engages the dreamer in the world of the dream, and in the process of dreaming.

A dream that represents explains. It explains what things stand for. It has an endpoint. It points to what things 'mean'.

"Mere understanding, however useful and indispensable, is the meanest faculty in the human mind and the most to be distrusted: and yet the great majority of people trust nothing else."

- Thomas de Quincey

In only asking what things mean, we limit our perspective.

When we dream – whether asleep or awake – and then we speak of the dream, we are speaking to dreaming *in its own language*. It is a kind of *re-voicing*, and in this process, *something new emerges*.

Meaning is a constant process of becoming and transforming...the emergent properties of our dreams and fantasies are the function of an active field – which is in constant flux.

As facilitators, we must stay alert and aware of discerning between processes that disclose and processes that explain.

We have to move beyond simply explaining someone to themselves, nor ourselves to them.

Rather, we need to let our words speak for themselves. We aim to take our clients directly into the 'experiential field' of the group, and not to explain the group environment to them – neither before, during nor after their experience of it.

We are valuing the primacy of a person's own perceptions over our own knowing. We place value on the embodiment of their perceptions, and how they are intertwined with the objects of their perception.

Vitalizing Presences – Surplus-life - Aliveness

- The notion of ‘*surplus-life*’ refers to *something grounded in the ordinary details of life as we live it – ‘the adventures of the ordinary’.*

In this way, when we approach our group members with engaged attentiveness, the presence in our approach allows the vitalizing yet ordinary details of life within the individual to emerge in the group. This can feel scary, wondrous, thrilling...

“What do writers do when they seriously notice the world? Perhaps they do nothing less than rescue the life of things from their death...the fading reality that besets details as they recede from us...or the slow death that we deal to the world by the sleep of our attention...The writer’s task is to rescue the adventure from this slow retreat: to bring meaning, color, and life back to the most ordinary things.”

- James Wood

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