

EXPERIENCES IN GROUPS: BRIDGES TO UNDERSTANDING AND HELPING

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This narrative describes the group work experiences that shaped the author's career in social work. He ponders mistakes made, battles fought and won, and the state of group work today.

Introduction: Lost in the Stars

Probably there is no other journal that urges its authors to talk about themselves, describe their own experiences, illuminate both their own and the voices of those they work with, and then ask them in their conclusion to discuss what they learned by writing the article. There is no other journal in which I would not feel it rather audacious to talk about myself. In fact, even with permission, it is difficult for me to do so.

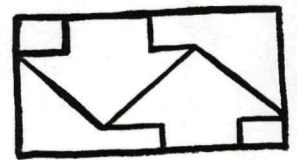
What follows are five vignettes, parts of process records I made for myself and occasionally use with groups I work with. As one of my teachers once said, "If it's not written down, it never happened." The vignettes are selected because they deal in part with non-verbal helping approaches such as play, games, and activities, aided by discussion of the experience. In these illustrations the catalyst that made for change was often the activities that allowed the conversation to deepen and promote social interaction.

There are times when words alone are insufficient to encompass the human drama. People reflect the drama of their times, their experience, their creativity or their "robustness" or hopelessness by the nature of their actions often expressed through art. Throughout history, we find that certain themes repeat themselves; one is the recurrent theme of the human in conflict. That battle is extremely dramatic, and it is reflected in the theatre, movies, and music of the day. Whether the struggle is in the form of people against

nature, humans against the Gods, human against humans, persons' exclusion from or attempt to enter into the human community, or people against other powerful forces of control, all are presented through the medium of the arts. Art, it has been suggested, is victory in our battle with the Gods.

Throughout history, music and drama have been used therapeutically to soothe or to stir the soul. Drama for Aristotle was a way to purify the spectators by exciting certain emotions that could offer relief from selfish passions. The famous innovative "group therapy" dramas were established by Coulinier, the director of Charenton (a French mental asylum), who organized "famous performances in which madmen sometimes played the roles, sometimes those of spectators. The insane that attended these theatricals were the object of the attention and curiosity of a frivolous, irresponsible, and often vicious public. The bizarre attitudes of these unfortunates and their condition provoked the mocking laughter and the insulting pity of the spectator" (Foucault). We are reminded of similar audience participation in programs such as the Jerry Springer Show.

The origins of social work with groups are usually highlighted with references to settlements of people like Jane Addams and social action efforts, particularly at the community level. Only later in its history did group work take on more clinical aspects, leading to social behavioral change and group therapy. Or so the story goes.... But that story is not the



whole story! Mutual aid, structured into numerous church groups and organizations, was an integral part of early African-American heritage. There were immigrant benefit societies and fraternal organizations. In fact, mutual aid was the major source of social welfare long before social work came upon the scene. Mutual aid became the mantra for social group work. Group work was being done with children and adults in mental health settings long before there was such a thing as group therapy. Neva Boyd (1935), coming out of the playground and recreation movement, recognized the importance of games and play in work with groups and headed a group work program at Northwestern University and a training program at Hull House. Hanifan (1916) coined the term "social capital" because of his interest in civil connections located in community center programs running out of schools almost a century before Putnam wrote *Bowling Alone* (2000).

The press to generic social work practice became a major force in the field approximately thirty years ago. It is a major factor in turning away from the games, play, stories, arts and crafts, acting, dramatics, dance, and democratic simulations of miniature congresses, once seen as important aspects of social growth and social relations. The work of Neva Boyd (in Simon, 1971) and others like Gladys Ryland (Wilson & Ryland, 1949) and Ruth Middleman (1968) focused on activities and the importance of play and the value of recreational activities for work and growth. For the most part, their ideas are lost in the stars.

In this article, I discuss some experiences in groups that have shaped my views of helping. These experiences are narratives or stories that required reactions from me as the worker and/or from other members of the group. Of course, we know that the stories are never the whole story; they are incidents, spaces in time that are only parts of the landscape of the person's life, but their selection

had significance at that time and impact on the future. These are all stories in which activities are joined with words to help us work with our clients. The stories told by those we work with, either individually or in groups, become the bridges from which we start the helping process. In fact the time and audience influence how we tell the story. Stories are never the same twice, unless they are written down.

The Bridge

I worked with a group of six boys of about 10 or 11 years old who at that time were labeled mentally retarded. One boy, who I will call "J," was African-American. The group members gave themselves the names of comic book heroes, and every Saturday morning we met and usually played games, took a trip, and talked about things. They liked the trips the most, that is, next to being in a group "like the other kids." Of course, some trips were problematic, like the boys going into the duck pond to feed the ducks, or pushing buttons on the elevator to terminal tower. But most were fun, except the time we crossed the bridge, a particular bridge. J got frightened and cried, saying he didn't want to go, but we went anyway and he cried most of the trip. Back at the center, thinking he was afraid of bridges, I told him they were safe, not to worry (blah, blah, blah). He calmed down. A few weeks later on another trip heading in the same direction, he sat next to me in the car, something I hadn't let him do since the time I found out he was a compulsive button pusher. As we came near the bridge, he began to cry again, louder and louder. This time I turned the car around and went to a park instead. It wasn't until we sat down for a snack that he quieted down.

What was it about that bridge that created such problems for him? I tried to talk to him about it, but I didn't get much of a response. The other boys did not connect his crying with the bridge but worked at calming

him down for about two minutes; then they all ran off to play. I spoke to his mother, who would bring him to the meetings on a bus and pick him up afterwards, to let her know he had been upset. I told her about both experiences. I hadn't mentioned it the first time because the boys often got upset, particularly if they were doing something they got tired of. She said she didn't know what it might be, but did say there were often discussions in the house about how the river divided the city and that Blacks weren't welcome on the other side. I didn't know how to respond.

I will never know if that was the reason for J's fears. While we were often able to talk as a group about what the boys would like to do at the next meeting or what they would like to call the club (which led to their comic hero names), their attention span was short. At the meeting after my talk to J's mother, I asked the boys if there were things they didn't like or were afraid of. The responses centered on other children making fun of them at school. They all shared that concern. The talking lasted about six minutes; soon the boys were running around the room, eager to get out the door. J wasn't fearful in the group. We stayed on the east side of the bridge; the group didn't like to talk much. They just wanted a club "like the other kids."

The Tea Party

The public housing "Estate" was one of the nicer ones in the city. At least I thought so because it was only two stories high with a number of apartments in each building. There had even been attempts to grow trees, but the kids had really mangled them before they had a chance to grow (almost like a metaphor for the kids themselves). The "Estate," as it was often referred to by housing officials, was made up almost totally of African-American residents. The planning group I worked with was composed of all women. Most were about 50 years old. Although all of the tenants officially were members of the

tenants' organization, I met weekly with the planning committee. I was to help them develop a program to have tenants manage the estate. It would give them more say about their living conditions and might also provide a few jobs. (It was a program initiated with a HUD grant.) I was familiar with the community to some extent because I had directed a Vista Program at the Phyllis Wheatley Neighborhood House, just prior to and during the Hough Riots.

Some of the residents had lived there about 20 years. One of the women had seen her mother raped somewhere nearby twenty years earlier. She was the vice-president of the planning group and told me about that incident at one of our weekly meetings. The planning group would meet in each other's apartment every other week and my assistant, a young male resident in Junior College, would plan with them the sessions for the training program. The group knew her story.

At each meeting, the person whose apartment the meeting was at would serve coffee and cookies and cake. I worried a little about this and didn't know how to handle it other than one time saying I wanted to bring cake next time. They understood. At one of the meetings, while we were talking, preparing the agenda for the next tenant meeting, and eating, there was a knock at the door. The manager had arranged for all of the apartments to be exterminated that day. The tenants had not been notified, or at least didn't recall, and the manager was asked if he could come back later. He said he couldn't, and admitted the exterminator, who sprayed even in the closets with the dishes. He saw us eating at the table and said not to worry, as it wasn't toxic. He finished quickly and left.

The women were embarrassed and angry. It was as if anyone could come into their apartment whenever they wanted. They had no say. Waiting half a minute, I picked up my cookie, started to eat it, and asked, "Does that sort of thing happen often?" There was

no answer but one of the women said, "You know, this is something the tenants organization should take up, what do you think?" One member said she would bring it up at the next meeting and we discussed the best way to do it.

Lost on the Moon

The ten group members were all policemen, some on the force for almost fifteen years. The group's purpose was to discuss ways they might better deal with some of the family problems they come across, particularly when they are called into a family fight. Often they become the target of the abuse and, at times, are physically attacked. There was also some concern about how to handle mentally ill persons they picked up on the street. In essence, it was what was generally called "Human Relations" training. They were, what might now be called, a mandated group. They had no choice and they had to meet weekly for about an hour and a half, unless they had to be in court or on other special duties.

From the first meeting, things were not going well. They resented being forced to come and made it clear that they really didn't want to be there. However, they did respond except for discussions that might reflect on their behavior, other police officers, or topics they thought political, such as racial issues (they were all white). I think it was about the fifth meeting that they talked about their training and that a lot of it was nonsense. I felt it was their way of saying what a waste of time this was, but when I asked them, they said of course not. At an earlier meeting, they had asked if I wrote and handed in reports on them. I told them all I had to hand in was their attendance, but did not add that whatever they said in the group was confidential, although it was.

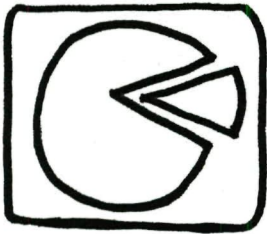
They didn't trust me and wondered if I ever told my classes about them. I told them that I had mentioned that I was working with a group of policemen but I never discussed

specifics. I told them a little about a social work practice course and a course on discrimination and inequality. In fact, I used a case related to the Detroit race riots in which a policeman had saved someone's life. They asked about it and I told them that when a "Negro" man was being beaten, a policeman acted to stop it because a woman told him that was his role. They smiled at that and I asked why. This was the first time I'd pushed them a little. One of them said it was their duty to protect. No more was said. I said, "You guys are tough." They laughed.

At no time during the ten weeks that we met did they ever contradict one another on police behavior. Toward the sixth meeting, they did start to roll their eyes occasionally at some of the comments being made by other officers. I saw that as progress toward a more open relationship.

They were cordial from the first, but made it clear to me that they were the "power" or did I make that clear to myself? I didn't make the introductory remarks students now learn to make to mandated groups, like "I know you don't want to be here, but if we work together..." I introduced myself as a social worker and talked about the goals of the group. They were not particularly interested. I asked them to introduce themselves. The "old timer" said something I thought interesting and surprising. He said that in 15 years he had only drawn his gun on a person once. None of the others talked about their gun experiences.

I started by asking them about some of the major problems they faced when they got calls involving family fights. Their approaches varied, with two of them talking about their physically restraining the male and giving him a warning. The way they said it suggested there was a little more than that. The old timer said he rarely used force; he and his partner would talk to each person in a different room. Almost all of them talked about not wanting to arrest anyone, although they used the threat



as a way to calm things down. While it sounds that things were open, only four of the men said anything at the first meeting. The second and third meeting was about the same, but near the end of the third meeting, one of the policemen introduced the topic of what they should do with some of the mentally disturbed people they picked up in the streets. Some of the hospitals didn't want to admit them, so they ended up putting them in jail overnight; then they were back on the streets. They said it was the same thing they did with drunks: put them in jail for the night. Most of them agreed that there was no good service. One had befriended one of the people in the emergency room of a nearby hospital, and when that person was at the hospital he would admit the person. They seemed honestly concerned more about the mentally ill than about the drinkers, particularly if they were minorities.

I told them I used case records a lot, like one called "Lost on the Moon," which had been published in *Psychology Today*. At their request, I brought it in. Briefly, the exercise is about astronauts who get stranded on the moon with about a dozen objects. They have to figure out which ones would help them survive on the moon. During the exercise, I experienced the only time my clients disagreed among each other, arguing and even calling each other names. When they asked me how they compared with my other classes. I told them they were much better—they were, since they had a better grasp on what might help in a survival situation. They had a great time, and left in a high mood. The following week they were still talking about it. One had done it at home with his wife and kids; others had tried it out on some of their colleagues.

We talked about what they had learned in the game that might be helpful to them. They talked about their feeling of separation from the general public, how people just didn't appreciate them except when they were in trouble. They discussed being able to think

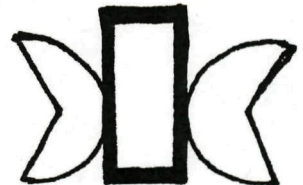
broadly, importance of consulting with others who might know more. I often wonder what would have happened if I had done "Lost on the Moon" at the first meeting.

Some Guys and Gals

The last two weeks of camp were reserved for about twenty-five adults. The camp was under the leadership of a wonderful social worker, Mel Herman, and was part of an organization serving the orthopedically handicapped. During those two summers with Mel I learned what social work could really be like. I was the program director, which meant I had daily meetings with him each morning with two other leadership staff, one of whom was Louise Fry who later taught at Boston University, to talk about how things were going and about any camper who might need some special attention. I also learned how important frequent team group meetings could be for the clients and the staff.

The first six weeks we served children, most of whom were in wheelchairs or on crutches, and many of whom needed care in dressing, eating, and other basic necessities. The training prior to the children coming to camp consisted of five long days during which we tried to prepare the counselors for what they would have to do and what the children were like. We thought we had done a pretty good job. When the buses arrived for the first session and the children started to be helped off by the counselors on the bus, those of us who were new to the experience stood motionless. It was beyond our expectations; we had to remind each other why we were there. But this is not about the children; it's about the adult group.

Many in the adult group required almost total care. They lived in institutions, and although they were well cared for, the two weeks at camp for most was a unique change in their institutionalized routine. Almost all were in wheel chairs, but a few were ambulatory and helped counselors whenever they



could. Trips to the beach meant dragging wheelchairs through heavy sand and being stared at by the usual beach goers. For some, an evening trip to the bar near the camp was a once in a lifetime experience even though it was for a beer or a coke.

The highlight of their two weeks was putting on a production of *Guys and Dolls*, limited, of course, by the fact that most of them were in wheel chairs, their speech was often difficult to understand, and the music a little off key. The audience of the other twenty campers and the counselors loved it.

It was customary at the end of the adult session for the camp executive staff to assess the value of the experience to the campers and inform their institutions of their progress, and whether they should be recommended to return the following year. The recommendation for one young woman, June, who was severely handicapped and strapped into her chair and never spoke or participated in the activities, was that she not return the following year. Mel received communication from the hospital saying all she did was talk to them about the wonderful time she had at camp and how important the experience had been. The hospital staff felt she had made great progress because of her camp experience. She came back the next year, and we were much smarter.

The Disguises of Connecting

I have mentioned Neva Boyd whose ideas about the importance of activities influenced a great deal of the work with groups. In fact, she may very well have been the first group worker to work clinically with groups, primarily because of her belief in the value of play as a helping medium. One of her articles had special meaning to me because it indicates the importance of connections. The scene is an institution for people diagnosed as mentally ill.

"A man released from the Chicago State Hospital for the Insane related his experience with play as follows:

"I knew I was insane, but I couldn't pull myself out of it. Every day we were taken out to the play field where the attendant kept us sitting on the benches doing nothing. One day I looked up and saw a new attendant. He had a ball in his hand. I stood up and he threw the ball to me. The instant it struck my hands it was as if my spine was frozen. We threw the ball back and forth for a little while. I was perspiring and so exhausted I could hardly walk, but for the first time I knew I could be cured. It was the 'feel' of that ball in my hands that made me sure. It went all through my body the way it did when I played ball as a boy." (qtd. in Simon, 1971, p. 64)

Talking about another program, in 1918 she wrote:

"Whole wards of patients totaling about nine hundred were given some form of recreation every day except Sunday... Because it was believed that by observing the workers as well as the more stable patients...the policy of bringing all the patients on the wards to the gymnasium was followed. None were ever coerced; and even though they sat and only occasionally raised their heads and stared vacantly at those in action, it repeatedly proved to be the beginning of their participation.

Some of the results of this early experiment were so obvious that many of the medical doctors who had offered opposition in the beginning became ardent supporters of the work; and the nurses in charge claimed that whole wards of violent patients were far more quiet than this type of patient had been before this treatment was introduced."

(qtd. in Simon, 1971, p. 55)

Conclusion: The Bridge of San Luis Rey

In Thorton Wilder's classic book, the bridge is where the major characters are by chance for their final story, a story none will ever tell but that serves to enlighten and create wonder for the world. The bridge connects those people to each other and to us. The bridge offers a way to connect to the world, and that is what these stories indicate to me. It connected me with my profession, with the dreams of the group members and how the activities need to grow out of the life of the group if they are going to have meaning. I also learned that we don't always know what the activity means to the person. Little by little I learned the importance of trying to see the whole person, not just the problem.

How does catching a ball connect you to the world? How does having a beer connect you to others and with life? How does crossing a bridge connect you with fear, and how does a worker come to understand that connection? What these stories had in common as I thought about them is that it took me a long time to really see the whole person. Not just a policeman as a policeman. Not just a woman in a wheel chair as a non-responding camper. Not just a child with a label, but a child with a history.

The tenants were not just committee members planning a program; they were whole people with many stories to tell, and I only saw what I had been obliged to see. I still work hard at not just seeing my students as students, but as persons with many stories. Viola Spolin, first a student of and then a colleague of Neva Boyd, spoke about the importance of the "point of concentration." She was training actors and taught and worked with actors in Chicago's Second City. Her book *Improvisations for the Theater*, served me well both in practice and in the classroom. In our work, the client's life is the "point of concentration," not just the story told

but its meaning in the landscape, including the parts of the story that are missing. What's behind the story? We missed part of the story of the young woman in the wheel chair because we didn't listen to her silence. We made our own assumptions about her based on what we thought her story should be. I missed J's story because I was thinking he wouldn't be able to talk about it. I missed helping the police officers more than I did because I feared their authority, and I assumed they wouldn't want to play. Has group work missed opportunities because we have given up play?

Did I really learn all of these things from these stories? Well...that's the way I'm telling it this time around.

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