

SUMMER CAMP, VACATION AND THE INSTITUTE: WHAT DO THEY HAVE IN COMMON?

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As I was trying to find a focus for this opening address, I thought about my participation as member and leader of a variety of groups. I was a member and, for a period vice chairman, of a university psychiatric department. I have served on the Board of Directors of Temples, abortion clinics, and an organization that provides housing and rehabilitation services for chronically mentally ill persons. I served two years as a general physician in the US Air Force medical corps, and, of course, I have belonged to many ordinary social groups. Over time, I have used my understanding of group processes to reestablish my own sense of emotional and cognitive balance during conflict, and when possible, help the group or organization get back on track. I wondered if any of these experiences might be relevant to help prepare you for the experiences of the Institute and Conference.

I initially had planned to talk to you in detail about the Articles of Confederation and how they represented a failure of our founding fathers to fully develop a group that was capable of dealing with all of the problems facing a new country. What happened in the processes leading up to that document was the inability of the representatives of the various states to cede any real authority to the central government, which was in part linked to the issue of slavery, but mostly a fear of autocracy and domination by elitist portions of the society. The Declaration of Independence almost seemed to be concretized by each of the states as they maintained their own autonomy. The States seemed to act like individuals who could not trust a national leader to take care of them, but only look after his own interests. Consequently, group cohesion failed to develop.

Washington described the Articles as trying to hold the country together with a “rope of sand

Last June, as I was trying to sort this all out, I received a letter from my 17 year-old granddaughter, Miranda, who was working for the first time as a summer camp counselor. Maybe, I thought, her experiences might be fun to think about. Then my wife, Esther, reminded me that Pardes, my nine year old granddaughter, was going to sleep-away camp for the first time. As I thought about both girls, it dawned on me that their camp experiences might be a good segue for me to talk about group processes. I realized that their experiences at camp would involve both leadership and membership in groups. Perhaps that would be relevant to our topic this morning. So let me start with the older girl, who presents a leader’s perspective.

Miranda, [show slides] wrote: “Yesterday our kids arrived! I’m assigned to the bunk G-8, which is for 12 year old girls. At first I was a little nervous because 7th grade girls can sometimes be mean and catty, but my girls are really nice and every one totally bonded on the first day!” I thought, “Ah the hope and dreams of a new leader. The honeymoon period is in full bloom.” Of course I wrote her a note saying that if the girls didn’t rebel and test the rules, they would miss part of the fun of camp. To be forewarned is to be prepared. .

Pardes, [show slides] the 9 year old, was headed off to camp with several of her friends. She was not worried about having to meet an entirely new group of kids and believed that she could rely on those she had already known, while becoming acquainted with the others. I knew she was correct. In any new experience as a member of a large group, having a subgroup of prior colleagues eases the entry process.

I will return to what happened with Miranda and Pardes later in this talk. For now, it is sufficient to note that leaders, be they camp counselors or institute leaders experience anxiety that is similar to what the campers or group members experience. Since most of you are going to be members of an Institute group, not leaders, I will be directing most of my comments to you. I will reserve some comments for Institute leaders.

Isabel Allende in her wonderful book, *Paula*, describes her anxiety before going to her first dance. Not only had her father spent several hours teaching her a variety of steps, he offered a piece of unforgettable advice: *Remember that all the others are more afraid than you.* The rest of his advice may be more metaphorical but just as pertinent. He told her: “I should not sit down for a second, but should take up a position near the record player...oh and not eat anything because it takes tremendous courage for a boy to cross a room and go up to a girl anchored like a frigate in her chair and with a plate of food in her hand. Besides, the few boys who know how to dance are the same ones who change the records, so you want to be near the player (p. 68). The message was clear: “you are to take charge of things for yourself. Don’t be passive.”

The Institute is advertised as offering a particular kind of learning: a combination of experience and cognitive review. The latter is intended to help frame, and consolidate learning. I believe that you will find that description barely scratches the surface. What I think is absolutely central to this experience is that you will form new relationships and often enduring friendships. Abraham Lincoln, reacting to his dear friend, Joshua Speed, departing from Springfield, wrote:

“How miserably things seemed to be arranged in this world. If we have no friends we have no pleasure, and if we have them we are sure to lose them and be doubly pained.” Only someone who has allowed himself to be vulnerable, to break down the barriers of ordinary social discourse, and deeply engage in this process will allow you to have such pain.

Everyone here hopes to have deeply meaningful experiences and to form new friendships. Obviously this occurs very often. We have a very high rate of recidivism! You may perceive my theme here: take risks and you will be rewarded.

I want to take a brief look at some of the factors that may interfere with achieving these goals. We are all professionals and identify as such, and in social interactions we can often become stuck in our professional roles. As therapists we are supposed to be free of anxiety, able to understand others without having to consult “psychic hotline.” Of course that is nonsense. Nevertheless, when we meet people outside the field who seem interesting and attractive, often we are cautious about letting them know what we do. Because we have likely had experiences of telling people that we are psychotherapists, and watch them shrink back or make a comment like: “Oh you can read my mind,” we have been cautious in revealing our professional identity and in particular our profession as psychotherapists.

There are other barriers to shedding our professional role. How many of us, in conversation with a friend, or our spouse, significant other or a colleague who is a friend, suddenly have been startled when confronted with: “I am not your patient.” Gradually, we learn in our intimate relationships that we have to abandon our therapist role. Even

when we try, we may not always succeed, particularly for those of us who have been in the field for a number of years.

Just to balance the equation the opposite scenario also takes place — when, after a disagreement or a more volatile argument, the significant other says, “Why don’t you treat me with the same respect, understanding and empathy you have with your clients.” Tough work we do, isn’t it?

And, by the way, it isn’t just how others react to us. Often we hide behind our role. One of the most difficult tasks you will face in your Institute group will be to step out from behind your professional role shield. This means interacting with one another without a therapeutic stance. If you can do this, you will also learn first-hand just how much courage is required of the patients we invite into our groups. I know you know that, but you may not really know how hard it can be. My own experiences when I have participated in a process group, which I have done on a number of occasions, is that I initially find myself thinking process. It takes a very conscious effort on my part to internally say, “Stop it”! What am I experiencing right now?” My inner dialogue is merely a reminder of the task at hand.

In addition to hiding behind our role, sometimes we protect ourselves from deeply engaging when our competitive juices get activated. As a member of a process group, I remember responding to the leader’s interventions, or non-interventions, from a particularly competitive stance. I would internally critique what was being done. At one level that was pretty good fun, but at another level, I was not allowing myself to become a fully engaged member. I have been able to extricate myself from that stance by asking myself ---- what was the impact of that comment on *me*? – Did it feel useful? Was I

neutral? Or did it feel aversive? I found I learned a lot more this way. Although I must say that I also learned about my competitiveness from the first type of response.

Our patients also exist outside our therapy groups! And one of the ways you can learn about therapeutic processes and about yourself over the next two days is to observe what you do during meals and other extra-group times. There are so many opportunities during these two days, and also following the Institute, to chat with others and learn about their perspective on the processes in a less formal and often less guarded way. Learning is not confined to the formal hours of the Institute, by any means – use your time with colleagues to process your experience.

And now a few words for the leaders, as you also have your own particular stresses. You are showing your work to colleagues who are as informed as you are about group dynamics and leadership responsibilities. There is an inevitable temptation to either restrict your “natural” self on the one hand, or to “show off.” This is just a reminder of what you probably already know. To you I will simply remind you that the participants in your group came to have a profitable time, not to critique you. They’ll probably do just fine no matter how well *you* perform.

As I said to the participants, use your extra group opportunities to share with colleagues your experiences, both your successes and your uncertainties. Many years ago there were Institute groups that went off the Conference site, in order to have what amounted to a two-day demonstration group with inpatients, followed by extensive discussion with the Institute participants.. I led a Special Institute group of in-patients at a New York Hospital in 1985. During the wrap-up portion of the experience, one of the hospital’s senior faculty members, who had observed the group, asked me to consider my

response to several questions: “If I had to re-do the group, who would I choose and who would I exclude?” “What were the aspects of their way of interacting that contributed to my choices?” He was careful to note that I paid particular attention to those I would choose. It was easier for me to identify why I might not like someone. But what he was demonstrating, was that if my choices were limited to only the “nice,” cooperative people, and not ones who would stress the system and me, I would be limiting their and my own learning. In essence he was asking: Was I selecting a nice cooperative group? He noted that I would have to do a great deal of work in order to create an atmosphere that would have contained conflict and, thereby, increase the potential for learning. From him I learned that the most significant and valuable learning that one receives in these experiential groups is from experiencing and working out conflicts. This advice not only applies to leaders, but to members too. In a brief group experience it can be very easy to bury differences. . After all, the sessions will soon be over. But I would recommend that you take a risk and try to address and explore the differences. You may even find hidden similarities in the process of working together. I think we can learn a great deal from people we tend to avoid, and only when we take a risk and get to know them, do we learn something new. In life it is very easy to avoid that process.

Hopefully during the group sessions you all will use the experience to see if you too can share an aspect of yourself that will allow you to feel more deeply engaged in the process I was going to make some suggestions how to do that, but I found a quote from the Philosopher Bertrand Russell which sums it up best: “I think we ought always to entertain our opinions with some measure of doubt. I shouldn’t wish people dogmatically to believe any philosophy, not even mine.”

Now, back to the granddaughters whom I had mentioned earlier and who had important camp experiences last summer: 17 year old Miranda and nine year old Pades.

First, Miranda:

Upon her return from camp, Miranda told me that indeed the experience had gone very well. Because she was only a CIT (counselor in training) she had gone to camp several days early for an orientation period. She was given a set of guidelines to help define her role. Those guidelines were:

1. Always be aware
2. Always behave as a professional
3. The kids come first
4. Private life stays private
5. Respect your colleagues.

As I perused these principles it occurred to me that they were equally applicable to both leaders and members of process groups. They could be thought of as ideals that each of the counselors should internalize – In our group therapy language they might represent group norms and ideals.

Miranda did learn a good lesson about dealing with anxiety in new situations. The occasion for that experience arose when the group was planning an overnight backpacking trip. The girls complained about the weight of the backpacks, sharing their fears of being overburdened and what it would be like to sleep out overnight. They sat in a circle and talked for almost an hour – and the trip went off without any significant disruptions. Of course, the combination of the girls knowing one another and the campfire discussion was very helpful to sooth initial anxieties and prepare these girls for

both the hike and overnight camping. The parallel with group process and development is rather clear – namely, that as the girls got to know and trust one another they could share their fears, evaluate the difficulties and be better prepared for what was ahead. Miranda said the trip went off very well.

Pardes went to sleep away camp for the first time. Indeed, it was also the first time that she had spent more than one night away from her parents. Here I had the opportunity to see another side of the “first experience” story, specifically that of the camper/member. As I noted previously, it turned out that Pardes knew some of the kids in her cabin before she went, and she also had 3 older sisters who had gone to camp for several summers. Previously, she had sat rapt with attention listening to her sisters’ talk about camp, absorbing their many adventures. So she felt pretty self-confident as she went off to camp for the first time, she did admit, though, to being a little anxious about her first experience away from home for so long.

In her first and only letter to me she said “P.S. I will tell you in person my story” and the first thing she said in person was, “It was awesome,” and the second was that her fantasy was that the camp dining room would be set up like that at Hogworth, the school in Harry Potter. Her perseverance showed through when she told me about her experience horseback riding: she fell off three times, but got back on after each fall

Pardes major complaint about her camp experience was that one of the two counselors lacked patience and yelled a lot. Pardes and her bunkmates felt that they were in no position to yell back. Even when I questioned her closely, Pardes would not acknowledge that she and her bunkmates tried to get back at that counselor, other than saying she

wouldn't want her as counselor next year. That seemed to work for *her*, but I hope for you, that you are able to speak directly if your leader misunderstands you.

All people and groups need rules or a set of guidelines in order to function effectively. When we meet our groups we review the group guidelines; when boundaries are crossed attempt to put these transgressions to therapeutic use. Likewise, in Camp there are guidelines for Counselors and campers

Pardes told me about the Camp rules which she felt were helpful. However, the rules didn't cover every situation like when a camper bit the counselor. She guessed that next year "no biting counselors" will be part of the rules.

I will end with a brief story I recently learned from one of my colleagues in San Francisco, who attended his first AGPA conference several years ago. On his summer vacation, this man went on a back-packing tour in Peru. Included in the trip was a visit to a native healer who administered a drug called Ayahuaska, which purges and creates an altered state of consciousness – this was the "trip" part of the trip. With the help of the healer he got in touch with important aspects of himself. What startled and pleased me was that he spontaneously said that the impact of this experience with the native healer was very similar to that of his first AGPA conference. The conference had also been mind altering, but without the use of medication. I hope for all of you that your Institute and Conference experience will be as wonderful.