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Growing Up and Old and What This Has To Do With The Institute

When I was asked to give this address, I said to myself, “Oh my, am I really that old?” Then I answered to myself, “Well, as a matter of fact you are.” After my shock at being asked to do this presentation, I realized that I knew exactly what I wanted to say. I composed the address in my head instead of sleeping that night. In the morning I knew I could write it all down, but I also knew it would take me all year to have the courage to give it.

In this speech, I will take you on a journey from being a naive 26 year old Institute member, to being a more sophisticated one, to being an Institute leader, to being an Institute Committee member, and, finally, to being an Annual Meeting Co-Chair. I will share what I have felt to be the most important learning for me.

My interaction in groups – as participant and leader – has been the central theme of my professional life. Experience with the Institutes, as a participant and as an observer, has helped me understand complex dynamics, including the prickly edges of love and hate, the fine line between

constructive and destructive forces, and the challenge of balancing chaos and order.

Now, let me talk about being old. For one thing, time goes by so fast. I feel my life is on fast-forward. It is hard to believe that when I was 10 years old, I thought the summer would never end. Sometimes I forget what time of year it is; of course, part of that may be living in California.

Another characteristic about being old is that I feel the same inside as when I was young, and my parents are still very important to me, even though they are dead, and then I look in the mirror and go “A-h-h-h!”

Well, I only have 15 minutes, so that’s it for being old for now, except to say that I don’t get a good body for free anymore, and I don’t know each year what new surprises my body will have for me. Now let me talk about my being young, and then I will get back to the wisdom part of being old.

I attended my first Institute when I was 26 years old. The backdrop was that I had been leading groups for four years; I was respected for my work with pre-delinquents and unwed mothers. I was married to my first boyfriend and I was his first girlfriend. We were teenagers when we fell in love. We really didn’t know whether our marriage was “the real thing” or

we were playing at being grown-ups. (What I hated most about being young was that there was so much I didn't understand.)

At any rate, I had never participated in anything that even vaguely resembled an Institute. In this first Institute group of mine, there was a man I found very attractive. We were eyeing each other the whole time. It turned out, to the group's amazement, that he was an Arab and I was a Jew. Our magnetic attraction was the inspiration in the group. People said, "Look at the possibilities here: this means Jews and Arabs can love each other and there can be peace in the world!" I can't tell you how ecstatic I was to be a central part of this profound process. I came home euphoric, never to be the same again. I told my husband that I had found out the answer – what we had wasn't the real thing; we could have so much more with someone else. We started seriously considering divorce.

Two years later, at 28 years old, I attended my second Institute. The backdrop is important: in one year, my 27th year, my brother, who was 10 months younger than me and like a twin, was suddenly found dead. Plus I gave birth to a second child; plus I got divorced; plus I moved to Manhattan – a place where I had never lived. I got settled in my new city and knew it was time to learn more about the internal workings of my psyche. My mentors at Postgraduate Center strongly encouraged me to attend the AGPA

meeting; I agreed, thinking the Institute would be a good place to begin deep self-reflection. I don't think anyone, including me, realized how vulnerable I was.

Although I was quite competent as a group therapist, it never occurred to me that once I told my story in this new Institute group, I would get any response other than love and support. Well, that did not happen. I didn't get sympathy or empathy or emotional support. My reaction to this shocking surprise was to find a spot on the floor to stare at and work my way in to a hypnotic trance. I refused to budge. Of course, I heard everything that was going on in the group. The group leader did not know how to handle such a situation. There were no Consultants or quality controls as there are today. The process went from bad to worse and was never resolved.

I was very upset by the experience and kept struggling to understand it. I felt I had been scapegoated. My mentor, Edrita Fried, told me to write a letter to the Institute co-chairs, explaining the group process in detail. Her confidence in the Institute Committee was the beginning of my realizing what a special community AGPA was. AGPA, as a healthy organizational system, took feedback seriously and continually modified its infrastructure. Today, there are many supports for the Institute leaders, so that they can lead the best Institutes possible.

So, what would I want to say to that 26 or 28 year old Institute member now? First, we don't want people to go home and start divorce proceedings. Second, if you are angry, say so; don't go into a trance-state in the group. Now that I have had years of psychotherapy and training, I will share how I view these two group situations now.

In the first Institute, the group was a classic example of Bion's (Rioch,1970) pairing basic assumption group. What the Arab and the Jew did not realize was that the group had an investment in coupling them and was actually using them for its own unconscious need – to give birth to a Messiah. All members, including them, colluded to make this possible. If the group reached its goal, the unconscious assumption was that all the members, including them, would benefit. It is humbling and disconcerting to realize that our identity is largely formed by reflections we get from other people. (Sullivan,1956) The way we see ourselves, the way others see us, the roles we assume in groups are partially the result of who we are and partially what others project on to us (Mullahy, 1952).

Now for the second Institute. I was obviously furious with the group and the leader. I could not deal directly with my anger, so I stymied the group by controlling them with a behavior that subconsciously I knew would

perplex them. I put myself in the scapegoat role, grabbing attention this way since it didn't work to get it in a positive way.

In the past twenty years of my clinical work, I have been impressed that people in this day and age are most uncomfortable with anger. In the crisis groups I led at Kaiser Permanente (Lonergan,1985), people came in symptomatic and almost always got better when they were able to survive a personal conflict in the group. Not everyone is as comfortable with their anger and sadism as current theorists, Yvonne Agazarian (1988) and Ariadne Beck (2000) or our Annual Meeting Co-Chair, Jerry Gans.

Jerry and his wife, Nancy, were having dinner on our deck where the yellow jackets can make eating unpleasant. My husband had a bee trap sitting on our dinner table, a transparent contraption where bees get trapped and drown in the water below. I angrily whispered to my husband, "get that off, we're eating!" Jerry heard me and said, "Not a problem. I like my sadistic urges gratified while I am eating dinner."

Yvonne Agazarian, in her book **Autobiography of a Theory** (1988), joins Patrick de Mare, in asserting that anger is linked to a primary, creative, life force. It can be transformed in to energy, mental and physical.

Ariadne Beck and Peter Dugo (1984), other modern day theorists, write about the Scapegoat as a leader. The Scapegoat leads the group by

forcing it to deal with aggression, a basic task of the group if it is going to develop.

Those of us who are old, remember Eric Fromm's **The Art of Loving** (1956). In 1991, Gerald Schoenewolf wrote the book, **The Art of Hating**. He sees true love as one that grows slowly, with a dash of Hate. He ends his book with a twist on an old proverb. One could ask, "Is it better to have hated and lost, than never to have hated at all?" (p.196)

Back to my Institute experiences. In my 30's, I attended a few Institutes on Supervision with only 2 others attending. I got much instruction from experts and was very grateful. In my 40's, I started training as an Institute leader. I watched Pearl Rosenberg consult to a leader and was stunned at her insight. Later, I was on the Institute committee. I watched Pearl and Bea Liebenberg bring the Institute Committee into a cohesive group in one evening. I was star-struck. Their love of the members and their generosity was infectious. Later, I saw Bernie Frankel and Mel Stern do the same thing. These leaders became my models.

So, what do I want to say to those attending their first Institute? I am sure you are getting the picture that years of thought have gone in to

perfecting the Institute structure, so that you can have the best educational experience possible.

What is it that I wish for you in your two-day experience? What perspective would I like you to have, to get the absolute most out of your experience? Put briefly, I would like you not to oversimplify the experience. I would like you to appreciate and immerse yourself in the complexity of group process. We all face the dilemma of wanting attachment for the comfort of intimacy but fearing that we will lose our identity (Guntrip, 1969). So we protect ourselves to preserve our autonomy but if we go too far, we can wither from loneliness. We are social animals who need attachment for survival but we also need our individuality (Foulkes, 1957). It is Jungian philosophy that encourages us to hold opposites generic to humanity: war-peace, feminine-masculine, dependency-autonomy, black-white, and yes, love-hate. (Zinkin, 1989). We need to embrace paradox, such as seeing that people's strengths are also their greatest weakness and that what attracts us to someone, is also the thing that ultimately leads us to irritation, and even disgust.

Louis Zinkin (1989) writes about the value of a group being able to hold chaos and confusion. This means diving in to "the primordial soup of

opposites”. For example, you need to look at war and peace in you, not just outside you. Zinkin writes about “the poverty of clarity and the richness of obscurity” (p.255).

I also would like you to keep in mind the stages of group development, particularly, Trust, Power and Control, and Intimacy (Schutz, 1966). As you go in to your first session, see if you can be in touch with fears connected to getting to know these strangers. Does the leader appear trustworthy? How do you wish the relationships would evolve?

As you go in to the second session, pay attention to any irritations you have with fellow members or the leader; try to express them. See if your group can tolerate some conflict. Notice how it is for you to have others express conflicted feelings and reactions.

As you go in to the third session, try to be in touch with any longing for greater intimacy that you might have. Is there any risk you want to take to make this a meaningful experience for you? Are you in touch with a sexual, competitive spirit? Can you do something to move closer to others that you have never done before, breaking new ground for yourself? Can you self reflect and learn something new about yourself? We are therapists who are focusing on others a great deal of the time. This is a chance to get

something for you. It will be education, not therapy, but it can be personally useful for you.

As you go in to your final session, be in touch with how it feels to say good-bye and how you are going to integrate what you have learned in to your life back home. The group is just two days, but that is a lot if you are authentic, take risks, and are fully present in the moment. Remember, attachments, even brief ones, are the building blocks of who we are and who we become. (Lewis,2000).

I want to leave you with one other thought. Apparently, the Native Americans have a belief that in nature, wherever there is a poisonous plant, an antidote for it is within 6-12 feet away. (Williamson, 1992). So, you are now about to embark on a treasure hunt. The toxins and their antidotes are in your Institute group experience. I hope you have adventure and fun as you find the treasures, in the safety of the Institute experience.

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