

AGPA Institute Plenary
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“ What is going on Inside?”
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Thank you for the very kind introduction. And thank you to the Institute committee for asking me to speak today. When I received the invitation last February, I was immensely honored. But when Angela wrote soon after that asking me for the title of my talk, I was really at a loss because I hadn't even figured out what I wanted to say, let alone what it would be called.

For a little while I thought I should talk about why I love groups even though most of my traditional psychoanalytic colleagues prefer dyads. But like all of you, I know what they do not know--that groups reach people in ways that dyads often don't, that groups can help make people better faster, and that one way or another, alone or combined with individual therapy, groups enrich treatment. And I also know that groups are amazing venues for learning about how people operate at their worst and their best and how they can join together to help themselves and one another do a better job of this business of living.

But all of this would be preaching to the choir, and I wanted to do something more. I thought I might say that my title was “TBA”..”to be announced”..That was a joke at first but then I realized that “to be announced” suggests something that is unknown at the start, something to be revealed in the future. *And then I knew that this was exactly what I wanted to talk about today, ...that knowledge about ourselves and others is both more limited and more difficult to acquire than we would wish, and further, that what we assume or think we know at the start can interfere with what we are ultimately able to learn.* Ours is a field that is inclined towards short-term guesses that seem to pass for long-term truths. Too often we try to explain before we examine, and thereby cut short the process of careful exploration. We need to be guides, not wizards and to do that we need to listen, to question, and to keep as far as possible from preconceptions. Hard though it may be to accept, we are limited in what we can actually know or help others to know. Isaac Beshevis Singer said, “Our knowledge is a little island in a great ocean of non-knowledge.” How right he was! And though tolerating ambiguity or ignorance is enormously challenging, it is absolutely necessary if we are to begin to discover what is unknown.

I know this sounds as if I might be minimizing the importance of theory, but I am the last person on the planet to suddenly become atheoretical. We all operate within some kind of conceptual framework. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we all have a theory about how people function. But theories should help us process and understand the information we are able to obtain. They should not dictate its content. It can be all too easy to abuse theory to reduce our frustration, to substitute it for the laborious process of psychological discovery which should be used to formulate specific ideas or constructs about any individual person. And these ideas and constructs can in turn be used, eventually, to test our theories or create new ones.

Of course, ignorance is not bliss! So I want to tell you something this morning about what I believe we can validly know about ourselves and others and how groups, including Institute groups, can help us to explore and understand without presumption. More specifically, I want to talk about exploring “What is going on Inside,” in the present, because I believe both that it can illuminate the core of what goes wrong in our living and that it is the necessary beginning of knowing what we can do to make things right.

Let me start by suggesting that we should not overestimate the “factual “ validity or dependability of the memories we rely on when we are exploring our interior lives. Neuroscience is telling us a lot these days about memory which, not surprisingly, turns out to be far less reliable than our genetic theories would have us believe. Nonetheless memory has a role, along with actual experience and hard wiring, in creating the text of what exists inside of us--processed, revised, sometimes even invented over the course of our lives. And this text defines to a significant degree how we view and interact with the world, consciously and unconsciously, cognitively and emotionally. We are unlikely to ever really know what has “caused” us to become who we are. But we can try to learn about what is inside of us in the present (including whatever remains from the past), which to my mind – at least for the purposes of helping to better one’s life—outweighs anything that may or may not have actually happened to us previously. Going even further, I would argue that not only does the connection between the inside and outside preempts the connection between the past and present: it is all that we can reliably know, and all that we can hope to change.

As A.J.Kennedy said in Original Bliss, “Our interior lives have seismic effects on our exterior world. We have to wake up and think about that if we really want to be alive!” Our interior world and its connection to how we live constitutes our input into our own lives, which is far greater than most of us want to acknowledge. It is so much easier, so much more convenient to blame anyone or anything , especially from the past (mostly parents of course!). But the hard fact is that the way we live is forever framed and colored by our immediate, internal psychological state. Even if our memory could be shown to be accurate, what, in fact, can we do about what has already happened? As Aristotle said, “This only is denied to God, the power to change the past.” All that we can change is what we have inside of us and what we do with it, regardless of what our theories tell us about how it got there. This is where we have some degrees of freedom in our destiny.

Neuroscience has confirmed that to a very significant degree we see what we expect to see (usually unconsciously). To this extent, we all operate within a realm of our own creation. Moreover, we humans seem motivated, neurologically and psychologically, to make the world look, feel and respond the way we want, need and expect it to, regardless of the degree of disparity between what is inside us and what is agreed to be reality. We will sometimes go to extraordinary lengths to maximize this continuity using a very creative set of mechanisms: we will choose people or situations that intrinsically confirm our beliefs; we will provoke the responses we anticipate from others; and in the extreme, we will outright transform our perception of reality to fit our expectations. (The last of these is especially central to transference.)

Certainly there is only a thin line between this normal state of affairs and the point at which internal psychological life trumps reality altogether. While these processes are ubiquitous,

not everyone crosses the line into pathological transformation on every occasion. But pathological or not, the more each of us can learn about ourselves and our input into our lives, both as patients and as therapists, group members and group leaders, the more we can reclaim our agency in living.

As we all know, this is one tough process. The late John Updike once said, "You see why I am not given to introspection. Scratch the surface and ugliness pops up!" And when ugliness threatens to pop up, resistance is not far behind. Freud understood that the forces opposed to change are as powerful, if not more powerful than the desire to make things better. Well this is my chance to say how lucky we all are to have found our way onto the group therapy path, because I think that groups display a special "magic" (as Connie Concannon called it in her Presidential Address) in tackling resistance. Groups multiply the lenses we have available to observe our reactions to others and their reactions to us. Our vision is magnified in groups because our reality testing is open to challenge, often tested, and finally strengthened by the contribution of other members. In a group you view yourself off target. You respond to yourself in others, not always consciously but with less anxiety, so that you can become aware of things you might otherwise choose to avoid. In groups, anxiety is shared; retrieving and revealing the forbidden is encouraged. Group members see that being open doesn't necessarily lead to anything negative such as retaliation. And most importantly, group interaction can illuminate the ways in which your own internal life affects your interaction with external reality. It only takes one other group member to challenge a perception or a response to reveal a possible disconnect between what our insides tell us and what is really going on.

We need as many windows to the inside as possible in order to effectively explore ourselves. There may be no royal road to the unconscious, but groups can and do orchestrate many little paths that will help us get there despite our best efforts to sidetrack the journey! You will experience many of these little paths in your groups over the next two days. And because Institute groups differ in some important ways from regular therapy groups, you will also have the opportunity both to test out some of what I have said today and to broaden your horizons as to the power and value of group.

First, the Institute presents a wonderful opportunity to explore what can happen in the absence of the kind of history we are usually taught to obtain. Unless you end up with a close friend in your group, you won't know much about each other. For the most part, everyone in the group is, if not a personal stranger, certainly a psychological stranger to the other members and to the leader. This is not how we do things in a therapy group, of course, where we are much more likely to interview our prospective members or know them already from individual work. But in the Institute, whether as a group leader or member, you have a unique opportunity to focus on what is happening both in the group, in each member and in yourself at that particular moment, in that particular time and in that psychological space. And so I encourage you to focus on the inside, to notice your reactions and those of other members, to ask what is it like, how does it feel, what is being touched inside? Ask what is happening, --not what happened! Don't guess...ask a question. And ask "what?" instead of "why?"

The relevant past asserts itself whether you ask about it or not. It never dies and will emerge when it is really relevant. It certainly did for me. Here is what was going on inside

of me on a particular day in Boston many years ago in a group with Norman Neiberg. It was the training group for prospective Institute leaders. I did not really know Norm then, but looking back I realize how very lucky I was to have been in his group. As it happens, I am from Massachusetts and one of the most important people in my life, my grandmother, lived on a farm in a little town north of Boston. She had taken care of me when I was young and my parents were both out of the house working. I didn't realize as I boarded the train from NY on a very cold, snowy day that it was, in fact, the first trip I had taken to Boston since she died. More to the point, I was not aware of how determined I had been to avoid Boston altogether.

I wish I could tell you exactly how I got to sharing my loss with the members of a group who were perfect strangers to me, under the guidance of a leader who was also a relative stranger and all in a short, compressed two day period. I know that I went into that group feeling exhausted from the trip and cranky about the whole enterprise. I wasn't so sure I even wanted to be an Institute leader at all, never mind go through the laborious process of being a participant. But there I was and sometime during the second day, the group process captured me. I found myself talking about my grandmother, about the rage and sorrow I felt at her losing her. Getting in touch with what was inside me was not easy, but it went straight to who I am as a person. Some of what emerged for me was how unfair it seemed, how out of control I really was, like all of us, over something so important to me. I came out of this group even more connected to my grandmother's warmth, love, and the safety she had provided for me than when I entered. Remembering her came alive. It became something that I could draw nourishment from rather than something morbid to sink down into.

Her Hebrew name was Devorah Leah . Both of my children are named for her.

And now let me spend my last few minutes considering two aspects of Institute groups that are very different from our usual groups but which can give us an ideal opportunity to broaden and enrich our group horizons. Institute groups are compressed in time and have far more permeable boundaries than therapy groups. We don't have the luxury of slowly working through issues of trust which are heightened in the Institute by its special boundary problems; while most of the our groups will not meet again after this year, we are still professionals who may have or may develop relationships that will extend well beyond our time in Chicago, and this understandably challenges our willingness to be exposed and vulnerable.

On the positive side, this situation is an exaggeration what we ask of any new group member (and it is rather odd when you think about it)--we ask people who don't know us intimately (and typically never will) to trust us and to expose themselves to us and to others on some theory that something good will come of it. Fortunately, this usually happens! So if you are not a group member yourself these days, participating in an Institute group may remind you what it might be like for the people you work with in your groups. And it is also a chance to personally feel the powerful impact of group, as I did, because the Institute provides a non-judgmental context to explore yourself at a deep level with others who are there to guide you or share in the process. For those of us used to the more traditional group that meets over much longer periods of time with far less permeable

boundaries, it is both humbling and enlightening to discover or rediscover the far-reaching impact of the group experience.

What I learned from the Institute has turned out to be of major importance in my professional life. Knowing that a successful group could operate under conditions so different from those with which I was familiar helped enormously when I started to run training and experiential groups in residency programs. And it was absolutely critical when I found myself in the life-altering, traumatic situation that arose in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

The crisis intervention groups that many of us led during the period immediately after the attack were not “composed,” ... they were thrown together! If they met more than once, they rarely had the same membership. These were the most open-ended, boundary free groups I have ever led! People came and went, they were brought in by their friends or wandered in not knowing what was going on but randomly passing through an open door (the doors were rarely closed!). We constantly had to restate a confidentiality agreement, which was especially important because everyone knew everyone else and would have to walk out of the room and continue working together on their jobs; this understandably created a serious boundary problem for many participants.

There was no time for history taking. The reality was overwhelmingly powerful, and the present experience was all consuming. Every member of every group was invited to tell their personal story of the attack however they saw fit. They seized on the opportunity as best they could, even though most of them had never met a therapist before and were very wary of us. In no time at all, these groups came together and provided the participants a chance to share their experiences, to support one another, and to begin dealing with the consequences of this trauma if only in a rudimentary way.

The vital process that took place could only have happened in a group and went a long way to modifying the devastating effects on other survivors who were not fortunate enough to have this experience. For myself, I couldn't possibly have run these groups without having been an Institute participant and leader, without having learned to work in a very short time frame, with unstable boundaries and a changing membership, in other words without the safe and steady props that my private practice provides. I knew, from the Institute, that the group could and would do its work in spite of everything.

And what do I hope for all of you in the next two days?

Each of you has come to the Institute with your own internal landscape, filled with all kinds of unconscious and conscious details that inform your view of the world, your actions and interactions with it and everyone who occupies it or touches you. Give yourselves the chance to explore this landscape. Some of you will leave with new knowledge, some with an affirmation or clarification of things you already have felt or known. The more you learn about yourself in the next two days, the sharper and better defined your most important tool as a professional will be, and that tool, of course, is yourself. your ability to listen, to hear, to explore in a context as free as possible of preconceptions.

If you make this truly an exploration without a planned agenda, amazing things can happen in ways that you would never predict or even dream of. As Richard Wilbur (2008) said, in

“A Measuring Worm,” “And I too don’t know toward what undreamt condition inch by inch I go.” So give it a try! Go inch by inch. And enjoy yourselves!