

Awareness Matters: Personal and Political

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Spirit of the Times

We were recently speaking to a group about 'hot spots'ⁱ - sensitive or volatile points in an interaction, which if left alone are where conflicts cycle and violence escalates. It is possible for societies to carefully explore these spots, with facilitation - with all the emotion it entails, to find a way forward. At the hot spot, or point of charge, we all tend to pull back, or while trying to avoid a hot spot, we fall into conflict against our wish. 'Hot spots' are points where history repeats, but with awareness, they can be doorways to a different future.

This group was not psychologically oriented. They were involved with politics, leadership, and humanitarian matters. They were keenly interested in how to bring awareness into the emotions of history, so that violence cannot be so readily manipulated around unprocessed collective trauma and incomplete justice.ⁱⁱ

The enthusiasm with which they reflected on the importance of emotional and psychological awareness within their communities and society to prevent future conflict, gave us a sense of a changing spirit of the times.

Setting out

In this article, we take a look at the importance of psychotherapy contributing to a culture of awareness concerning social and political issues. We look at Process Oriented Psychology, particularly its focus on collective issues and conflict resolution with examples of community forum work with young people in gangs, and with communities dealing with the aftermath of war. We touch on dynamics of collective trauma, linking personal and political, and emerging patterns in leadership, where awareness makes the difference.

A culture of awareness

One of the ideas underlying this series of articles is that our profession needs its diversity of ideas and methods, to contribute to a wide range of personal, community and global issues. From the earliest days, psychotherapy has been considered political – that is it does not only help people to adapt. It stirs reflection, consciousness, and differentiation from personal history and society, so that we can contribute to changing and creating our world.

When thinking about social and political issues in this world, however, the notion of 'consciousness' has typically been linked to the idea of 'consciousness-raising' in the sense of social and political movements that have built awareness about dynamics of racism, class, sexism and homophobia. Although psychology has been applied to many fields, the notion of consciousness from a 'psychological' perspective is usually seen in relation to mental health and personal growth, and more rarely tied to social and political awareness.

A social consciousness and social activism is emerging, however, which has an awareness orientation at its root. We may look for roots as far back as Taoism, or in the non-violence of Gandhi. It is the knowledge that conflict cycles, and change is followed by backlash, unless

we are able to process the relationships between polarities. It involves ‘psychological’ and ‘spiritual’ skills to be able to recognise how outer events trigger one’s own personal history, and to be able to get to know oneself, to develop fluidity to not fall into polarised reactions. Or you can find the outer ‘enemy’ that enrages you inside your own behaviour, and by meeting that enemy first internally, you can discover useful means to meet the outer situation.

Process Oriented Psychology

Mindell coined the term ‘deep democracy’ to refer to the wisdom and transformation revealed in nature, and in individuals and communities, if we can represent all points of view, and bring awareness along into a facilitated interaction. This means inviting to the table those parts of our experience which are usually marginalized as irrelevant, too extreme, or subtle. It can be useful to represent the roles within a conflict, including ‘ghost roles’, which are inferred but not directly represented. Deep democracy is also an attitude that cares for the community in all its diversity and wholeness. It has a systems perspective, that recognizes our inner as well as outer diversity, and that our inner dynamics mirror the outer system that we are part of, and hoping to facilitate.

Process Oriented Psychology or Processwork developed originally as a form of psychotherapy in one to one work. In the 1970s, Arnold Mindell, then a physicist and Jungian analyst made a far-reaching discovery that the subjective experience of somatic experience mirrored the pattern of nighttime dreams. An early example was of a man with a tumour. Asked to feel the symptom, the man said he felt as if he’d explode. This matched his dream of fireworks. Mindell then helped him to explode with his feelings. Mindell formulated the notion of a ‘dreaming’ process that was revealed simultaneously in somatic and visual processes, which also related to Jung’s notion of synchronicity, meaning an archetypal pattern manifests simultaneously in a psychic and physical event.

Mindell and colleagues went on to study how ‘dreaming’ patterns can be perceived in vision, audition, proprioception, kinesthesia, and in relationship and the world. ‘Dreaming’ also manifests through subtle, unintended signals influencing communication patterns. Process Work concepts and methods track this dreaming process according to processes closer to and farther from identity, and according to belief systems structuring perception.

The methods proved useful with people in extreme states associated with diagnoses of psychopathology, and to communicate with people in remote states of consciousness, such as coma. The methods were also applied to facilitating community dialogue and conflict resolution in large groups.

There was a profound sense of excitement about the notion of discovering the method from the process, or person or group you were with. To give just a few examples: by amplifying subtle sensations and movement tendencies in the body, you might rediscover archetypal Yoga postures in people who know nothing of Yoga. Follow a process into relationship and you will meet the system dynamics informing relationship and family work. Follow a process into large group interactions, and you’ll meet the political and social histories that divide and unite us.

Out of love

In Los Angeles, 17 years ago, we were exploring the application of Processwork with large groups and were asked to facilitate a group of some 60 gang members. Age 10-17, from three different gangs, they lived together in a rehab facility.

We invited them to first get in small groups and talk about issues they were dealing with. We visited different groups and felt their enthusiasm for gang life. We then invited a group of older teenagers to talk more about this in the large group. One of them spoke about the tension and thrill connected with shootings. Immediately a teenage girl stood up and said adamantly that there is nothing thrilling about my grandmother being killed or my little brother being shot. At this 'hot spot' an adult from the rehab programme who was observing, used the opportunity to speak with conviction against gang life. He spoke with passion, but we could feel he didn't have the group's attention. A ten year old now spoke. All eyes turned towards him and a silence fell over the room. He said he loved his gang... 'When I was five ...my homeboys came in the afternoon, when my mother wasn't there...they'd come, look after me, give me cookies and milk... My cousin is now in prison. I would do anything for him, anything.' He said 'the reason for being in a gang was not for the killing, but for the love'. Keeping some of this atmosphere, even tenderness, the young people went on to talk together about what mattered to them, and their loss, fear, dreams, and future.

The words of this ten-year old resonated with us for years to come, as we later worked with situations of war and community-wide trauma. We saw how the urge for a feeling of home and belonging, accompanied by loyalty and dedication to community is a factor in many situations of conflict, where communities are played against one another. When unconscious this tendency is easily set off or manipulated. With awareness, this loyalty and dedication can be the beginning of finding forums to build creative pathways forward.

Getting Together

Although they lived together in a rehab facility, the young people from the three gangs had not spoken together until then. There are still very few patterns in society to come together, where there is conflict, and to believe in the potential transformation that could come from facilitating at a hot spot. Instead, we demand good behavior, or try to educate and legislate away what disturbs us.

It's natural to all of us to put aside something hot, to hope it will be forgotten, though we know it might erupt in conflict. Around collective conflict, emotions simmer under the surface and remain a ready fuel. Someone can come along and light a match to manipulate one side against the other, sometimes leading to full-scale violent conflict.

People come together in many ways, seeking solutions, at the level of family, neighbourhood city councils, or wider social and political organisations and contexts. What is needed are skills and a culture of recognising the potential creativity that can arise from facilitating conflict and 'hot spots'.

Community trauma

In violent neighborhoods and war-torn societies, touch a 'hot spot' and you meet community-wide trauma. This is one reason why people avoid 'hot spots'. Just under the hot spot, the trauma remains fuel that can be set off at another time. The psychotherapy profession knows the special care needed around individual trauma, so that people feel a sense of choice and

control, and feel sufficiently supported that they do not simply repeat the experience they are hoping to resolve. Similarly, when touching upon collective trauma in community forums, special skills are needed to address the community trauma, without recreating it.

Dynamics of collective trauma leave communities caught living with the ghosts of history, and repeating rounds of conflict. This easily leads to hopelessness, and economic as well as spiritual depression. Facilitated community dialogue in war-torn societies can support a community to find a way to reconnect with itself, to go forward intact.

Full circle – A forum in Croatia

We have written more extensively elsewhere about community trauma, and about facilitating post-war reconciliation in Croatia from 1996. Here we share a story from a more recent forum.

Our hosts told us that the group will not want to talk about the war. This was a forum for participants from ‘areas of special state concern’, ten years after the war. When we asked the forum participants what they wanted to focus on, however, the first thing they said was the community-wide trauma blocking their progress with economic projects to reinvigorate their communities. Others were adamant, however, about not wanting to talk about war trauma. They said, it was essential to simply forget the past, and look forward.

We invited a dialogue between their points of view. As the conversation continued, those who argued we must *not* talk about trauma constantly referred to the traumatic stories that they did not want to talk about. In the middle of his plea that we do not talk about trauma, a man said he lost all his family and friends in one afternoon. A young man said that as a child, he had to take a live grenade out of his baby brother's hand. A young woman said she had lost her father, and his body had never been found. She wanted to go forward and live the life he died trying to protect. These stories tumbled out so quickly, that at first there was no room for reaction. This is part of the experience of trauma- there is no time to react - the world moves on, and you have to survive. Or there are just too many stories – each worse than the one before. Or, if we begin, it will never end.

There is no one who can hear the stories. So, everyone tries to go forward, including those most traumatized, while at the same time caught retelling the story in nightmares, flashbacks, and visceral experiences – or in bouts of community violence. We stopped for a moment, to appreciate the stories that had just popped out, and the many more we had not yet heard. This group, now found themselves in a circle with a shared goal to move forward intact.

Awareness and accountability

We often see a profound shift in forums when someone is able to assume personal responsibility for collective events.

At the end of this forum in Croatia, a man spoke about how he was touched by the contribution of a young woman in the group. It was the young woman who lost her father. He spoke about the organisation he had created to look for missing people from the war. He said ‘I will find your father’. She jumped up and ran from the room. Someone went to see that she was okay, but she returned a moment later, tears streaming down her face. She embraced the man, and thanked him and the group.

Any conflict brings with it issues of accountability. Take a look at your smallest conflicts at the kitchen sink. There may be one of you seeking acknowledgement, an apology, or a reparation. Or, there may be a need to fill in the missing information that leaves conflict to fester. Beyond this is the love and awareness that keeps us engaged, and growing, no matter how impossible life gets.

In wide-scale violence, where there is no process of accountability, conflicts cycle - and accountability is an essential part of conflict resolution, including criminal accountability in International Tribunals, or bringing out the full story in Truth Commissions. Our forums contributed to the process of accountability by facilitating dialogue on issues of accountability across different sectors and professions in society, and between different ethnic/national groups on all sides of the war. It also brought the possibility for interaction and transformation, at individual, relationship and community-wide levels.

When the man said that he would find the missing body of the young woman's father, we could feel the transformation, not only for the young woman, but for all of us who witnessed this. It brought a sense of possibility. It brought meaning to it all. It brought her father home momentarily, as he showed this level of responsibility and care.

Personal and Political Awareness

Awareness links what is personal and political. It may mean grappling with our personal experience in relation to our ethnic/national, religious group. It may mean noticing our shock or silence in relation to world events. It may mean recognising privileges gained through others' suffering, and how we are part of a group that has oppressed others.

'Burning your wood' means getting engaged in all that is behind your affect, emotion and silence around collective issues, linking our personal and collective histories. It means the inner work necessary to free ourselves to be able to facilitate or relate with others without becoming frozen or polarised.

One of the early findings of Process Oriented Psychology is that you may begin working with a body symptom, and end up working with a dream, or the process appears in relationship between client or therapist. In the same vein, begin with a large forum made up of government and non-governmental organisations and end up with deeply personal encounters that seem to transform the world, at least for now. Conversely, when doing psychotherapy, if you thought the two of you are alone in your office, you will be surprised that you meet not only parents, grandparents and school teachers, but colonialism, tyranny and every chapter of world history. This means 'burning your wood', so that you are ready to respond, perceive and raise issues of racism, sexism, homophobia, or explore the ghosts of personal and collective history, trauma, power and privilege, as they relate to the momentary interaction between you as therapist and client and the issues the client came to work on.

Where are we heading?

Ask the youth

On the last day of a recent forum in Croatia, the group wanted to talk about difficulties engaging youth in their communities, the problem of young people leaving their communities, and the hopelessness this brought. A young woman spoke "I'm 17, and my

friend here is 18. No one in our community asks us what we think.” We hadn’t realized how young they were! We invited them and other young people to tell us what they think. With shyness and enthusiasm, they told us their dreams, plans to build their communities, or to travel the world, become a DJ! The young man from the previous forum, who had taken a grenade from his baby brother’s hand, said how the forum had changed his life. He said he was able to sleep, and bird songs could be heard again in the hills where he lived. He had felt supported as a leader in his community, bringing young people together to work on conflict. As we write this, we realise that having had to take a live grenade from his little brother’s hand, had a mythic dimension for him and his community - by actively leading in his community, he is going on to remove the volatility of unresolved trauma from future generations.

Awareness as leader

The premise of this article is that there is a part of us human beings keen to become aware and facilitate the possibility for transformation within even the most impossible situations. A big question is how to meet this part of ourselves, or how to recall this part of ourselves, when it is far from home.

In a worldview based on power and tyranny, or one side winning by way of majority rule, one side usually dominates while it can, until the other has an uprising. We do this also internally. But a new kind of leadership is showing up, that realizes there’s no future in the power dynamics of the past. Not only is there no future for the one who is downed. There is also no future in reversing the power dynamics.

New principles are leading, based on the psychological and spiritual notion that it is possible to liberate oneself from oppression by not repeating it. Mandela gave us this teaching when he emerged from prison with the intention of liberating his country. That meant, he said, getting the oppressor as well as the oppressed out of prison.

We learned this lesson again recently in London, where we were hosts, and part of a large facilitation team of a six day conference called 'Worldwork' ⁱⁱⁱ - the 11th Worldwork seminar in 14 years. We had 420 participants from some 40 nations, and had the most extraordinary week together working on some of the issues we face together as a world.

One of those issues, all too briefly touched was the genocide, and the devastation of cultures that took place in the name of civilization, in America and Australia - so horrific there are no adequate words, and very present for those who suffered, and those of us who have assumed ownership of these lands. There was a group of participants at the worldwork conference, who were Aboriginals from Australia, and a Native American Indian from the Shoshone-Bannock tribe. They said they’d come to see the country where the white men who arrived in their lands had come from. They wanted to meet and to learn together.

ⁱ ‘hot spot’ A concept from Process Oriented Psychology or Processwork, Mindell

ⁱⁱ See Audergon, A War Hotel: Psychological dynamics in violent conflict, Whurr/Wiley 2004

ⁱⁱⁱ www.worldwork.org