
18. A LETTER TO A YOUNG DIRECTOR

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Dear Friend,

Having agreed to your suggestion that I write down some of my thoughts on the role of Director in the work that you and I share, I find that the only possible way to start is in a highly personal mode. I will not omit structure and theory but the longer I have considered writing this, the more impelled I feel to start my story where it began, that is, where and when I first conceived (and it is a lot like getting pregnant) how I might write to you.

It was at the Bryn Mawr conference in 1993. I had been on staff for the first six conferences held at Bryn Mawr, the last three as Director. Perhaps every experienced person has a "conference" which seems most important or has been the site of the most learning or pain or even joy. That is Bryn Mawr for me. So, in 1993 I returned as a small group consultant after an absence of four years. Here are some thoughts from that time, written very early one morning.

"There can be a place in the morning to slow down and take care of my spirit—and not wish the whole week away the way I did when I was Director for the first time, and frightened and anxious—I haven't been here in four years. A lot has changed for me and the organization—for the world and for this country. All the diversity issues that seemed so new at Holyoke in '85 are true now. The complexities of diversity are the everyday stuff of small group and large group examination and interpretation.

"I need to remain as peaceful and quiet as possible—need to be careful with my energy. I will re-read a poem by Joseph Brodski, "I Sit by the Window." (1977) These are the final lines:

A loyal subject of these second rate years
I proudly admit that my finest ideas
are second rate and may the future take them
as trophies of my struggle against suffocation.
I sit in the dark. And it would be hard to figure out
which is worse, the dark inside or the darkness out.

Another morning at Bryn Mawr I wrote the following note which, on later reflection, seemed central to my decision to attempt this paper.

“Time now to stop all this narcissistic stuff—I am not here as a poet—need to assume my consultative stance with myself and to risk saying what I know, what I understand or think I understand.

“I enjoyed the article in the Sunday New York Times about American movies. They can be ‘Serious and Beautiful’ once again (as they were when I was young). I guess that means ‘serious and beautiful’ will sell but it made me happy because my ideas about conference work seems serious and sometimes beautiful so that I am glad to be in style. I am making a connection to this because it helps me to be brave and trust that what I might have to say about this crazy beloved work, that has pushed me so hard and given me so much, is worth writing down.” We are all “stuck” in our own experience and shaped by our culture or sub-culture and by our times. The little joke about why southern girls don’t like group sex is a fine example of this. Southern girls don’t like group sex because they have to write too many thank-you notes.

I wish we had a Chaucer in this organization, someone to tell all the tales, the consultants’, the managers’, the members’ and my own which is of a clinician and an artist.

There are managerial, administrative and consultative experiences which may form the style, shape and ethos of your directorship but my experience, which is all I can have, is that which shapes my directorship.

Here is some poetry that came out of a Mt. Holyoke conference, the artist part of me not being “a lost part” at that conference. These poems still ring true for me and reflect the infinite variety and complexity of interaction. They express what I think is “serious and beautiful.”

The Intergroup

The split up one more time, to form the nations
or the families or the old peoples home
or the hospital, chronic and intensive care this time,
they split by gender and by race, age and incompetence.
Just now they cannot understand, that boundaries
are only safe when you can pass through them
and that check points are entrances and exits.

They split into rage and lust and kindergarten
and I stand and watch. Who am I

to feel so knowing? I am still looking for that old passport.
And anyway, maybe this time the lamb will not be led to slaughter
and we can make him think. Maybe he will turn into a lion
Schweitzeroid in his rage and love.
Perhaps there will be a blond mouse in this jungle
or Tarzan might find Jane
and a vampy rabbit will swing on an open gate.

The hunters are out in the forest now, trying to kill themselves
and the women wait at the clearings for news of their sons,
calling
"bring them back alive,"
Who is the hunter, who the hunted?
Who is a member, who is staff?
and will that damned lion ever bed that quirky lamb?

The Large Group

Here is the war.

In time, the first pair of lovers will find one another,
the terrible tender gazes will begin, they will probably fall into one another's arms
and at the end, he will say, "We'll always have Holyoke."
There will be younger lovers too, and like young lovers, all they
can sing is Tonight. Let them. Hear them. One day their Ship of
Fools will dock at Casablanca.

Sometimes, there is a third pair. It is rare, but if you see it, look with candor. They
cannot join or part. They are forever fused and will all across this room in an agony
of silence and miracle. Love them the best but do not speak of it.

Here is the war, again. The men will form their lines, hard up
against one another. Randolph Scott will be on the left with the
horses and Errol Flynn will be in charge of the Light Brigade, you
may think of these as horse's asses. Good men and true will
ride, dissemble, feint and outmaneuver one another and aim to kill
the very man they are. It is a war.

Here is the war again.

There will be children. Guard your heart.
lest you should bleed your heart's last bleeding.
Stay with them, talk, but do not join. Help them to hear a voice
that is their own.
Shoot Peter Pan and Alice as soon as possible. Get the bibs off,
give them some red meat so their bones can grow, but slow, give

Now, in this section of my paper I want to address some technical issues and will enumerate them shortly. It seems essential to say here, however, that this is not a "How to be a Director" paper. This is a questioning, however painful, around the issue of what we are directing and why we are directing.

I do not believe that race, gender and ethnicity or sexual orientation are the central issues to be explored. They are powerful factors in a conference, but it is the exploration of the "parental" role, the leadership role with the rage and envy towards it, which must be the center of attention for young directors. I am using "young" here in the sense of "not highly experienced" in the role. The role of the "young director" is remarkably similar to the central problem of "young therapists," when the therapist underestimates the power of the role and hence lacks an understanding of the patient's behavior towards the therapist.

Let me turn to more specific issues around conference work, including staff selection, membership watching, how staff, directors or members get "stuck" and how to "unstick" them. Again, the central theme of my thinking is to emphasize the young Director's need to be newly aware, that is, to learn and relearn, the power of the role and to be prepared for the barrage of intense positive and negative primitive projections that the role collects. All of these ideas are hard won; they are my ideas. These ideas are not necessarily from the field of management or organizational consultation. They are not necessarily original although I think some are. They are constructs that have been proven in my experience, since all one can do is a kind of loose predicting.

We learn from our experience if we are lucky enough and courageous enough to collect all our lost parts, blind spots, ever present prejudices and just plain irrationality. (Just as an aside, if any of you young directors think you have escaped all that, that you have sufficient maturity, therapy, or experience, just wait till the staff projections join the member's projections in the third session of the Institutional Event.)

Let me consider now one of the major decisions a Director has to make. Who will be on the staff? Let me list the overt, sane and rational ways of making choices for staff. You need to consider the number of people you may need, the variable of age, gender and race, perhaps sexual orientation, the decision about whether your conference will have a training component. Also in this more visible level of choice, you can think about the prior staff experience of each prospective staff member. Finally, this mysterious thing called sentience may enter into your thinking. It should enter but it cannot be overriding to the task of the conference.

Now if all these decisions are made in good faith and with good sense, you probably will manage, but if you do no further exploration around these choices, you will have missed an elegant

them the milk of human kindness, guard your breasts. The shining children are the nearest stars that you will know. Help them. Throw wide your childish glow and breathe so they may go.

I include these in an effort to state here at the beginning of my paper that my central conviction, my working hypothesis, is the primary task of a Director is to tend to the complexities of self. It is not to manage the conference or manage the staff as if one could "decide" to do that. If, in the Director's role, I can attend and monitor my own experience then I can "hear" the staff and membership.

To say that another way, leadership has to do with task. There is no directing a conference in a vacuum. There must be a focus and in our model of group relations, the task is the focus. The task is to hear, to be sensitive to, to understand as best as is possible, what is going on in the conference at two levels, the readily available and the more covert levels. You are the instrument to measure these.

I am not so foolish as to think this is a task that is largely accomplished. I am a "good-enough" Director. I have had periods during a conference of being an incompetent Director because I could not hear myself and conversely times when I saw clearly and could take the lead to help others. Those five days at Bryn Mawr helped me to see how strongly I believed this and to find the courage to risk saying what I am going to say.

If you are going to use yourself in these ways, be sure to find a place of refuge and quiet during the conference. Those of you familiar with the Bryn Mawr campus may remember that there is a memorial stone bench and plaque to honor a graduate who married and went to China. She was killed at the age of 23 in an "uprising against the Christians" in the early years of this century.

I went to China at about the same age and in an equally dangerous time. I also got married. The difference in our stories is that I got out. For me the stone bench and plaque in a secluded and peaceful corner of the campus was always a place to go, usually alone, and find my energy and my passion for the work returning. This young woman was massacred. Although I sometimes felt as if I might be during a conference, I had not been. I had had opportunities to learn to live in a freer way, "to be courageous" as Margaret Rioch (1985) says.

I am therefore, starting this paper on a personal note because I think the only place real "work" can start.

chance to examine your style. You will have missed also some data you need as Director and without which knowledge you will be "managing" not directing. I do not think you can be truly creative in your directing unless this rich underside of staff selection is noticed.

For example, here is a staff that I invited. My goals were to have a staff balanced as to gender, race, age and experience. At that time, sexual preference did not seem to be a variable that could be noticed. When I refer here to level of experience, I refer only to conference experience, each staff person being an experienced professional in other roles.

There was a most experienced white male psychiatrist in his fifties, an inexperienced white female psychiatrist in her early thirties, a black male psychologist in his early thirties with moderate experience, a white male organizational consultant in his early forties with very little experience. The Administrator was a most experienced white female in her mid-thirties.

I had three women and three men, inexperienced and experienced, a balanced age range, one Afro-American, one staff member from outside the Center and two staff in training. Who could ask for any more?

There were many difficulties with the selected staff that took only moments to surface once the conference was about to begin. All of the men began to speak disparagingly of the Center and its work, and the meaninglessness of conference work and they all seemed to me to be keeping very sharp eyes on my face. These comments were made literally minutes before we were to walk into the conference opening. I said, taking my courage in my hand, that I thought this was the most important work I have ever done and that I was looking forward to working. Their conversation quickly changed and I thought I had passed the first test. They soon found new and even more exotic ways to drive me crazy. The women were not innocent in all this.

The process for choosing staff as outlined above was rational and organizationally oriented. I was concerned with providing opportunities for training and giving further work opportunities to competent people all the while assuring diversity and balance in the staff. As the conference unfolded, the second level of choice soon came into view. The black male consultant and the administrator were my friends, my sentience. They knew me and we all had all worked together many times. The white psychiatrist was to be the competent one and the two trainees were to carry the incompetence in a dignified legitimate trainee manner.

This interested me so much that I wondered if there were a third level that determined staff choice. There was.

If the white male experienced psychiatrist were competent then no one would envy my real competence. If the administrator and the black male were my "sentient ones," then they might distance me from my feelings that I really wasn't very good at this kind of stuff. And I wouldn't be threatened by their real competence.

The two trainees were here, at least in part, so that I could avoid my own feeling of being an adult learner. incompetent and embarrassed and angry with myself.

If the Director is "stuck" by not being able to explore personal irrationality, the conference as a whole cannot blossom to its full extent. I know that no conference has ever realized all that might be realized. If it did, probably there would still be groups of us at Amherst or Mount Holyoke or Sheppard Pratt still talking and exploring and learning and feeling so alive and enchanted with our learning that we cannot imagine leaving. Do you remember the beautiful short story in *The Atlantic Monthly* some years ago about the string quartet who had such an experience. It is called "The Everlasting Quartet" and the author is Whit Burnett. (Burnett, 1960) It is a story about the sublime experience one might have to work and in the end of the story the quartet gather to play their beloved music—and they just keep on playing, on and on. They cannot leave one another. Finally, at some later time they are discovered, together and, of course, dead.

Here is one of the closing paragraphs and it made me think of some conference work. "It was, of course, a perfect quartet. It is a rare thing to find a quartet which can meet at a time to suit everyone. Four individuals have four separate lives. It is rare, if you find four good players, that one doesn't have to leave before the others are satisfied. Here was a meeting not only of minds and talents but a meeting of spirits. It could happen only once in a lifetime. And they all simply played themselves to death." (Burnett, 1960)

This story is about the joy of work, of creating, of sharing learning. I hope you have all had this experience in your conference life. It is a model of what work we might do if we knew how to sustain the freedom to be creative.

The choice of administrator is perhaps the lynch pin of a successful staff. He or she or they are your lifeline as Director to the surrounding environment and to associated agencies or organizations. This choice of administrator must not be made on sentient bonds. Do not hire your friend's friend, do not hire a favorite graduate student or a colleague who is interested in the consulting work and would like to try "conference life" as an administrator. Hire an experienced administrator and let her or him bring along a trainee. This will take care of all the hopefuls without sinking your conference in incompetence.

The more central needs for providing training opportunities must also be considered. The facts are simple. If we don't train there will be no one trained to do the work. Many of us learned this work on the job so to speak, that is, we were being asked on staff with no training experience. It is one way to learn, but I cannot champion it. The necessity for training staff is an exact parallel to the necessity of some of us having children. Someone has to manage the world after we are gone. Additionally, trainees often bring in fresh insights and are able to identify existing issues which are so familiar they may not be clearly seen by experienced staff. As far as I know there has been no formal training for the role of Director although filling the role of Associate Director can be a useful introduction to the experiencing of the isolation and formidable projection inherent in the role of Director.

As adjunct to the training, written reports about conferences are a useful way of passing on the accumulated know-how or folklore. I write Director's reports and have recently decided that the best way to do this is to ask each staff person who is being considered for a conference, prior to the conference, to agree to write a brief report at the end of the conference. These reports could be joined in some way. I have tried it the other way by asking staff to write a brief report at the end of the conference and the response has been minimal.

I should like to speak now of a situation or situations that occur frequently in conference work. These are not positive occurrences but rather a breakdown of a sort of our efforts to provide opportunities for learning. I think some of the trouble lies in our traditional language or presentation of task. We say the staff will provide opportunities for learning for the membership. I am sure that many of you have discovered that there are many opportunities for staff to learn also but, often, when he or she is having difficulty in a particular small group, in one session or many, one can hear comments about "the group," its constituents, its particular difficulties. I would like you to consider this in a somewhat different way and I would like to use the small group as an example, although I think what I have noticed is true throughout all the events of the conference.

Two frequently occurring complaints come to mind. A consultant may say, "My group is so damned racist that they are unable to work with me."

Another small group leader may say, "The women in my group are so passive. They just sit, they are driving me crazy."

A third example might be a group that is described as cozy and therapeutic and intolerant of any angry or competitive feelings to be considered. Please note I am not talking about the usual fight—flight or pairing or dependence, but rather about the particular stance of a specific group. I think what is "stuck" in these particular groups are not the members but the consultant and that the consultant's "lost parts" or parts of self that are out of awareness, are the place where his or

conference discussion and seems to me to be an enactment of a kind of “out of awareness” pairing between staff and members. One notices it in the following way. The member who is seated directly in front of the director seems not an accidental choice. Often this member has carried a particular meaning or affect or cognition for the conference. This seems to me to be true for every member seated across from a particular staff. The message may be that the “worker bees” are in the front lines, or that the anti-work forces have prevailed or that some staff have made work relationships across the boundary or that some staff are filled up with or seen as dictatorial or deaf. If you examine this array of members and staff, imaginatively and carefully, you can often gain a sense of where the conference is, which is after all the primary task of the conference discussion, that is, to explore the conference as a whole and in its various parts.

I understand that in describing these phenomena I may be talking about two widely divergent possibilities here. The first is that I may be beginning to understand a hitherto unexplored dynamic or process, that is, my observations around the staff member pairing in the Conference Discussion is only the tip of the iceberg. Much remains unseen and only to be guessed.

The second way these glimpses into unknown places may be understood is that I am a fanciful old lady trying to find order in a pretty sloppy world. If that is so I am not the only one who is searching. You will remember the story of the students who wanted answers from an experienced teacher. In the world of Group Relations Conference life the story would go as follows:

Three or four young consultants cornered an old Director and said, “What do you think has gone wrong with organizational theory that we cannot use it to predict accurately?”

The old Director shook his head and said, “I don’t remember.” “Well,” said the students, “What do you think is the best way to train staff?”

“I can’t remember,” said the old fellow.

Question followed question and the Director seemed drained and kept saying, “I can’t remember that.”

Finally, one of the young consultants said, “Listen, old man, we have to live in a world where nothing is constant, everything is changing, there are no rules, men fight all over the world.” And the old Director interrupted him and said, “Oh, I remember that.”

What follows now are the conclusions I draw from my uneasy start about putting these thoughts together and my more specific perceptions around the actual task of directing a group relations conference.

The central questions seem to be: What are we directing and to what purpose or end?

These seem to me to be nasty questions. They are about the meaning of struggling or not struggling. Certainly, none of us alive in this age can escape the notion that the world is cruel, vast and indifferent to the joys or sorrows of one human life or even one thousand lives. We can see, just as easily, that time, whatever that is, is equally indifferent. We approach, soon now, not only the end of the "nineties," but the end of a century and of a millennium. These are human constructs, and only human constructs, as far as I know. What do we think we can do to make a difference, and even if we can, what kind of difference ought it to be? The philosophy of this paper is perhaps best summed up in the words of the Czech poet and statesman Havel, who says, "The world of our experiences seems chaotic, disconnected, confusing. Experts and intellectuals are more capable than ever of explaining the objective world yet we understand less and less. The awareness of being anchored in the earth and the universe the awareness that we are not here alone nor for ourselves but that we are an integral part of more mysterious entities."

We live in a world which contains such sadness. To speak only of recent years, think of Bosnia, Rwanda, Ireland, Somalia, the Middle East, and right here in Washington, D.C. as a few examples. It has been estimated that one-third of the babies in the world go to bed hungry at night. If we are not depressed by the range of human agony, perhaps we should be.

I do not know that these conditions can be changed. If I decide to accept work as "a Director" it seems to me the central concern might be to create of this perceived disorder that order which has to do with the "art" of leadership. It would be the learning and seeing and caring enough about this chaos, with which we are confronted, to attempt to understand and to give it meaning. One might pick one's way through the minefield and at least, not add to the chaos. That might be the least one might do. At most what would happen? Well, "at most" is still a mystery to me but to be as clear as possible about "self" might allow more use of self.

To confront one's self in a frightening and frightened world may remind you of Bion's thought around basic assumption life. I think that his thoughts can be subsumed under a denial of time passing (we have endless time to fight, to pair or to remain passive in the face of our pain) and this seems to me a denial of mortality. Death is not an allowed reality. Conversely, there is a paradoxical denial in group life around birth. It can be difficult indeed to sort oneself out from the crowd. In more conventional terms to differentiate or to be born may be as difficult as dying.

Here are some final thoughts about being a Director of a group relations conference. Simone Weil, as quoted by George Steiner (February 28, 1992) in *The New Yorker* magazine, "To take seriously existentially, the question of the significance of human life and death on a bestialized and wasted planet, to inquire into the worth or futility of political action and social design is not merely to risk personal health or the solace of common love; it is to endanger reason itself."

Ranier Maria Rilke says in "Letters to a Young Poet," "Perhaps all the dragons of our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us once beautiful and brave. Perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being something helpless that wants help from us." (1984)

And here are my final thoughts on being a Director:

Suffer your own fools gladly. You will be changed and then events around you will change. How this happens is a mystery. So far. Do not scoff at the group's experiencing oceanic feelings. There may be, as yet, an undiscovered ocean.

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