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SPRING WEEKEND STUDY DAY - MAY 17TH 1997

The study day on Saturday May 17th followed the Foulkes Lecture entitled " Traumatic Experience in the Unconscious Life of Groups: A Fourth Basic Assumption" which was delivered by Earl Hopper.

Early on in the first large group, somebody stated clearly again for us all, the problem of the conflicting agenda items, namely to discuss the implications of the theory of a fourth basic assumption, which Earl Hopper had laid out before us so eruditely and densely on Friday evening, and the on-going business/trauma of the GAS.

The main topic began to be aired. It was that a split has occurred between the IGA and GAS which has left IGA in possession of the House in Daleham Gardens and GAS operating from a basement in Belsize Village. It was mentioned that GAS originated with a group of 'traumatised' individuals coming together, in a process of 'massification', to create something new.

It was recognised that many members had a foot in both camps and were being drawn in two directions in the dilemma. The GAS membership felt that as the Belsize premises had no room suitable to hold a meeting they may find themselves gypsies - for ever? Do we fragment and disappear or develop as a changed and vital organisation? Was it even necessary for a society to have a house, would not an office, desk and computer suffice?

There was a search to locate 'the enemy'. Perhaps, suggested one member, the IGA and GAS had become too enmeshed in an 'amoeboid massification' state! Another pointed out that GAS was the 'mother' of IGA; now the more prosperous 'son' had ejected 'penniless Mum' out onto the streets without making proper provision for her as a good son should! The real enemy was unmasked. Money! GAS didn't have the wherewithal to raise funds for a decent home, even though they had contributed generously to the purchase of Daleham Gardens. They had been deprived of their rights by an ill-advising solicitor? Or by their own inertia? In the context of -the remnants we hope- of today's market economy, GAS's financial uncreditworthiness caused dismay amongst the membership, and stimulated the voicing of a sudden fierce pride in what has been achieved. " It is the face of Group Analysis throughout the world." The work with large and median groups, perhaps we should take this on board as a training function; the production of a fine Journal; the programme of meetings and symposia; and most of all, the international aspects of the work is something to be truly proud of. By now the question was being asked why GAS has been so deferential and agreed to move out anyway?

The morning session ended with a plea, interestingly from an overseas member with a slightly more objective standpoint, for GAS 'to get it's act together' (my paraphrasing of her words!). She suggested the need for a joint committee of GAS and IGA members to act as 'midwife' in the process of individuation of the two organisations. Although she was assured that the role boundaries between the two organisations were clear, her suggestion was accepted as being eminently sensible.

The afternoon large group opened with a reiteration of the morning's dilemma. Now the problem was posed 'are we avoiding thinking about the theory of the lecture by talking about GAS affairs, or would we be avoiding looking at what is going on if we resorted to an intellectual consideration of theory'? (May

I take a leaf out of Lionel Kraeger's book and offer a Jewish joke? Jewish mother buys her son two shirts for his birthday. Son thanks her effusively and goes upstairs immediately to try one on. As he comes back into the room to show it off, mother says "So! the other you didn't like?" We were led out of this no-win situation however, by a member who suggested that we try to hold up the framework offered by the theory in order to examine what is going on here concerning the Society. This in effect was how the group did engage during the afternoon.

Somebody commented that the amorphous confusion, we now found ourselves, in seemed to preclude thinking, somebody else asked about the feelings of members who belonged to both IGA and GAS. In no time we were plunged back into the history of the two organisations. Then there came a dissenting voice, "This isn't particularly interesting. Can't we talk to each other instead of about things?" "What do you want to talk about?" A hesitation. Then a contemplative, "Do we ever recover from trauma? Can we transform a negative concept and turn it into a positive one? Is dialogue in groups really the way? _____"

In this way, the afternoon group was led into work group mode. Several seemingly disjointed but interconnected themes were pushed around. The 'aspirin which had stuck in a member's throat', mentioned in the morning, became amplified as a metaphor for the 'pill' of theory that members were trying to digest right now. An overseas member who had felt attacked in the morning session was brought back into the group discussion, her contribution was affirmed; it was noted that there were rather few attenders from other countries despite the large overseas membership; the importance of the overseas work of GAS was acknowledged and validated. Overseas members now found their voices, one was able to share his own experience of envy and narcissistic wounding when he had been caught between two organisations pulling in different directions, and which he now saw as underlying the present conflict. Two members who became engaged in a dialogue of attempting to understand each other, were, it was suggested, by the Convenor, exploring on behalf of the group the difficulty of not being listened to/of not being heard. He wondered whether the group had now moved to a place where it was impossible to talk at all.

The group seemed to be stuck, it was pointed out that we had become an aggregation. We were reminded of the image of the flock of birds that had so vividly illustrated the state of 'aggregation' in Earl's lecture on Friday. Were we looking for a Messiah to help us to 'take flight'? Surely birds in flight were led first by some of their number until the leaders tired and dropped back whilst others came forward to lead! It seemed that the group had become enmeshed in the either/or mode that had been imposed by the metaphor of the fourth basic assumption. It had become a reality. Where indeed had thinking gone? We seemed now, as a mass, to be subscribing uncritically to the validity of the concept without further questioning?

Desultory attempts were made to re-establish connectedness, to introduce new material; an empty chair; the Copenhagen symposium; the training course in Israel; Brian Bosworth pointed out that

he was about to step down from the chair of GAS and hand over to Stuart Whitely. "The King is dead, long live the King!" None of these topics took off.

It was a member's dream that eventually brought about cohesion, touching as it did on unconscious but hitherto taboo aspects that had been standing in the way of integrating the new theory. The dream had incorporated elements of:- the dream 'ego' being embraced by a warm living body, a cold corpse, the 'real' dead person and old human bones under a bed being picked clean by sheep. [I wondered if the imagery of the sheep under the bed had derived from the marvellous production of Gulliver's Travels, shown on television last week.] The metaphor of the dream enabled several illuminating ideas to be aired. Eventually it seemed that the fourth person in the dream might represent Earl's fourth Basic Assumption. Perhaps it is O.K. to pick over the 'bones of the dead' i.e. to modify the work of dead Bion. Earl defended his right to do so, after all, isn't that exactly what Foulkes did with traditional psychoanalytic theory? The dream suggests that bones can be 'played' with and also that we all need to be able to open ourselves up to the 'shame' of trauma.

Having been given permission to recognise the 'corpse' in our midst, and to pick over 'dead bones', the group seemed now to be able to embrace the warm and living entity, it came back to 'life'. Somebody welcomed the innovation of being able to talk about the work of Bion in a Foulksian society [apparently a first!]; a note of optimism was voiced concerning the reaching-out of GAS to new centres, we were reminded of Foulkes's concept of network; we looked again at the proposed joint committee of IGA\GAS with optimism that they would be able to find a way forward; the chairman elect told us that he had been gathering lots of ideas to take forward but it would need time to work them through.

The credentials of the new chairman to be a member of IGA was challenged. It was pointed out that although not IGA trained, he was a teaching member. The last speaker seemed to sum up the feelings of the group when she pointed out what a relief this fact was to her, since it indicated that even IGA boundaries were no longer as rigid as they had hitherto seemed to be! My own impression was that during the course of the day, many personal boundaries had been loosened, opening up new freedoms for members of GAS to pursue the road ahead.

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