

## A REHEARSAL FOR UNDERSTANDING THE PHENOMENON OF GROUP

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*It is much better not to be pedantic, but to let the science be as vague as its subject, and include such phenomenon as these if by so doing we can throw any light on the main business in hand.*  
William James

Because the literature regarding non-European, international, cross-cultural, transcultural, leaderless large group workshops from the person-centered approach is so sparse, it is hoped that this report may provide both valuable information on this phenomenon and encouragement for future studies.

In April 1988, I participated in the *IV Encuentro Latino-americano de la Orientacion Centrada en la Persona* at the hotel La Pedrera in Uruguay. On the seaside, 210 kilometers from Montevideo, sixty-two psychologists and educators from Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Venezuela were present at this meeting: thirty-five participants used Portuguese as their first language; twenty-seven, Spanish. It was a week-long event with the stated purpose, "to meet and share experiences in order to reflect on distinct applications of the person-centered approach within the reality of Latin Americans." <sup>(1)</sup>

We each paid our own travel and living expenses. None received a fee. Except for meal times (which were frequently changed), no other program of events was decided before the first plenary meeting of the group. There was no discernible leader -- not appointed, elected, nor elevated by virtue of the strength of personality or reputation.

Since still little is known about this type of activity (see Rogers, 1977; Rogers & Rosenberg, 1977; Bowen, Miller, Rogers & Wood, 1980; Rogers, Wood, O'Hara & Fonseca, 1983; Wood, 1984, 1985, 1988 for reports on related events), after this workshop, I asked participants to write whatever they wished about their experience of the *Encuentro*.

Participants were requested to consider all significant aspects of their personal, interpersonal, transpersonal experience with regard to the workshop. For example, level of satisfaction with the workshop, significant changes in personal behavior and relationships, extraordinary experiences, perceptions of the group as a whole and its behavior: in realizing objectives, problem-solving, governing, integration, etc. Participants were requested to relate whatever experiences they wished but, if possible, to illustrate their comments with specific examples. Most replies

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were written in a sort of stream-of-consciousness style on subjects which interested the author the most. Twenty-nine percent replied: twelve in Portuguese, six in Spanish. One Uruguayan replied partly in English. This participant's comments were included among the Spanish commentaries.

Participant remarks deal with feelings (before, during and after the *Encuentro* -- including disappointment and satisfaction, frustration and joy, "good" and "bad"), and with perceptions (of self, of individual behavior and collective behavior, of the structure of culture, of time and space, of life and of a timeless trans-individuality). Commentaries also discuss significant changes and learnings that participants experienced.

While contemplating each statement I received, I asked myself, "What does this declaration communicate about the phenomenon of group?" In the spirit of *discovery-oriented research* which has been proposed by Mahrer (1988), I tried to be open to, "what is new in the data, to what is out of the ordinary, different, unexpected, exceptional, surprising, challenging, disconcerting (. . .) to what does not seem to fit, to what is hard to grasp, organize, explain." I attempted to be, "sensitive to the discoverable." I derived the meanings of "out of the ordinary," "different," "unexpected" and so forth from comparisons with the way such events as the *Encuentro* are usually portrayed. It is from considerable first-hand experience with large groups from the person-centered approach that I felt qualified to categorize the "exceptional," "the surprising," "challenging." (Mahrer, by the way, presents convincing arguments that the approach he proposes is a viable alternative to more conventional research. He goes as far as to declare that, "All in all, hypothesis-testing research does little more than confirm or fail to confirm the knowledge that we already firmly believe we have, as supported by powerful lobby groups.")

Although the categories I have chosen for reporting are disputable (I would welcome other suggestions), it is clear from the responses that, from the point of view of participants, the phenomenon of group is rather complex and possesses dimensions that are rarely noted by group facilitators. On the contrary, many group leaders assume that they themselves are the most significant factor in the group's success (but rarely in its failure). Out of participant commentaries regarding the *Encuentro* a sketch can be drawn of one perspective of the phenomenon of group which I hope will enlarge the field of investigation and help us gain a clearer understanding of this phenomenon.

From the present date it can be seen that the phenomenon of group includes individuals with personal attitudes, intentions, feelings and perceptions who relate to one another in social activities. Their interactions, the moment and the place have an effect on their consciousness. Their presence constitutes a culture (shared knowledge, values, customs and behavior) which favors certain collective actions (though separate, or so it is agreed, autonomous acts). Individual perceptions sometimes exceed what would be expected from the limitations of time and space. Participants' experiences may result in significant personal learning and changes of behavior.

What now follows are selected comments of participants which illustrate common participant perceptions and give body to this summary. Comments are unaltered except what may have resulted from translation and from the inevitable distortion caused by taking them out of their original context and placing them in categories.

## FEELINGS AND PERCEPTIONS

### *Before the Encuentro: Varied Expectations*

From the participant commentaries it is evident that personal objectives other than the official intention stated for the *Encuentro* also motivated participants to attend. As one person commented,

"I wanted to meet people who have the same vision of Man that I have and who are trying to develop their work from this vision." (2)

Some had participated in previous "Latin encounters" and wished to "see old friends" among other things. But several readily admitted they merely wanted, as one person put it,

"to recuperate energy. I was wasted, not able to work or anything."

And another said,

"I simply wanted to let myself be and accumulate positive energies that I was desperately in need of."

#### *During the Meetings: Frustrated Expectations*

Naturally, the expectations of some would clash with those of others. One person illustrated this thusly,

"Some people came to La Pedrera with the sole intention to relax on the beach, take it easy, get a tan and meet a soul mate with whom to share their cares and loneliness. . . it made me feel uncomfortable because. . . when I returned I had to report to my university 'the results' of the *Encuentro* and the 'significance' for my area of work."

Various persons expressed disappointment that they had not learned new theoretical formulations, as they would have liked to. In spite of this, the *Encuentro* did, for many of them, as one participant related,

"serve to solidify and enhance that which I had already learned."

One participant announced at the first plenary session the desire,

"to win the group over to the idea of Latin American integration. Specifically, I would like to know if anyone was interested in transcending their private, local and national experience."

This objective was frustrated, at least in the form that it had been pursued, since this person was interrupted by others who were irritated by these remarks. After the *Encuentro* the participant related a significant learning,

"never to develop such high expectations in this type of encounter."

After some time had passed, this person added that,

"I came to become more serene, less impulsive and having less need to incorporate other people into my projects."

#### *The Large Group Encounter: Frustration and Euphoria*

From their commentaries one may note that the large group meetings provoked very intense emotional experiences in many participants. One participant, for example, expressed frustration because, as this person saw it,

"People seemed to fulfill very well their expected roles: the *Encuentro* includes large group meetings; in these meetings one shares feelings. . . so, let's get on with it. But they were 'speech' feelings and not 'felt feelings'."

Another person expressed global disappointment because,

"I felt disappointed and without hope for psychology. We did not go beyond what is known, and not even that could we reach. I did not feel I could use everything I have."

The first few days of the large group meetings were frequently described as aggressive and several persons reported disagreeable experiences. For example,

"Those who felt more emotionally charged and had the courage would express their feelings, risking that others would grant legitimacy to what was felt or thought. In this

whole activity I felt badly because I always had the fantasy that they had rejected me on that first night when I expressed so openly my expectations of the *Encuentro*. I felt that the irritation I had engendered persisted during the whole time."

Another person regretted that such a state of affairs could occur,

"I expected that people there would know how to 'listen' better to what others had to say. I thought that . . . people there would be more apt to respect the limits of each individual. Even when disagreeing with someone they could do so without invading the other's space or feeling threatened by everyone. I was very disappointed in the first three days. The large group meeting was very aggressive and it was impossible to 'hear' what people were really saying. I saw a big fight over the power of knowledge, which made me fantasize those participants who were or wanted to be the most notable."

Another, recognizing these aspects, also observed,

"I don't believe we had a great encounter. I did not experience the formation of a community [but] something Latin was lived. I believe that this was important: each could be who he or she wanted to be."

However, another person seemed to regard as constructive an outcome that others felt was disagreeable:

"I don't know if the *Encuentro* was equally satisfactory for everyone. To tell the truth, I really hope that it hasn't been. I don't believe that a group must always be homogeneous; I believe that the group will be more beneficial, if it can promote sharing on its highest levels, where differences are not only accepted but effectively discovered and developed. After all, not being satisfied is as motivating as being satisfied."

Near the end of the *Encuentro*, many noticed a change in mood having occurred. One participant remarked,

"It could be observed that many people showed an amazing amount of attention and solicitude toward others in the last few days. All this and more gave the group a distinctly different face from its initial one. On the last night, even I felt comforted and returned to expressing my feelings. I noticed that the group listened more sensitively and empathically."

Participants' emotional experiences were varied, ranging from deep disappointment up to oceanic feelings. On the lighter side, one person related,

"The large group meeting began with a heaviness in the air, but after a little while a bird suddenly entered an open window. It flew around above our heads and tried to go back out, but banged up against a window pane. Everyone's attention was captured. Someone ran to the window and opened it and the bird flew to freedom. Coincidentally, after this event the group also liberated itself. Or, at least, I liberated myself, perhaps. The fact is it seemed the group had searched for a unity, that in my view can only be found when it transcends words. . . . I noted that 'language' was not very important when you really want to 'listen' to someone. I felt that in the final days of the *Encuentro* this came to pass and people could converse and know each other better."

And another reported what sounds like a profound experience,

"The silence that followed [an outburst of indignation] and the subsequent reflections by members of the group formed for me a genuine unity. I was touched emotionally and totally 'plugged in,' belonging to the group. It was if all our consciousnesses were one thing only, alive and promising."

### *Feelings, Perceptions and Significant Changes After the Encuentro*

Many people noted improvements in their ability to relate to others. One person said, "The effect of the *Encuentro* on my relationships is basically to turn them each time more honest, more truthful."

One person reported to have returned home with a, "force and energy that had been awakened in me." And, "little by little I was discovering that what I felt was closely connected with the convivial experience of the *Encuentro*."

Some of those whose relations improved also felt more efficient in their counseling practices.

"I see myself as more open to the communications of the other," one participant remarked.

Also changes in perception of self were noted. For example,

"I discovered that I can be beautiful, even though for long periods of my life I believed that I would never again 'be beautiful.' And this new beauty is independent of how much one weighs, their age, curves or being fortyish or fiftyish."

## SIGNIFICANT LEARNING

### *Cognitive Integration: A Surprise from the Spontaneous Small Groups*

One participant, unsatisfied with some of the other aspects of the *Encuentro*, reported that,

"The small groups satisfied completely the intellectual aspect. There you could know what each person is living and what each one thinks, which were his or her problems and preoccupations in applying the person-centered approach. For me, it was very gratifying to participate in the small groups and share with those present."

Another related that, after being unsuccessful in attempt to communicate effectively in the large assembly,

"I proposed [a small group] workshop which was really good for me for I got in contact with the participants and with myself. From that day on my energy cycle flew again, I could be on my own or with the rest of the group. So on the night. . . when a lot of the group were feeling uneasy and began to explode I was very astonished for it was the first time I was feeling good in the silence of the great group, and I experienced what was going on as somebody who was in the group but [for] whom the cannon balls flew over her head."

Another participant found the spontaneously organized small group meetings favorable to the integration that this person felt was missing in the first days of the *Encuentro* in other activities,

"The spontaneous philosophical discussions in small groups were the best. At the conclusion of each I had a feeling of integration and closeness."

### *Psychotherapeutic Learning: Cognitive-Emotional*

Participants also reported psychotherapeutic effects. For example, cognitive integration,

"I felt alone. And I discovered that solitude was a right that I possessed, just like the right to have all the other feelings that I might want. . . anger, fear, jealousy, envy, love, friendliness, tenderness, respect, shame, timidness, anything that would come to my heart. Solitude is the recognition of my absolute life, and the recognition of my relative limits."

And behavioral changes of an emotional nature, as reflected in this comment:

"I am more open to meet and converse with whatever person, even strangers on the street. I have the sensation of being an old friend of the whole world."

One can also find indications of a mixture of emotional and cognitive learning. This same person expressed,

"I could live and integrate completely my personal experience with my theoretical perspective. To live out the question of transference in the group and [at the same time] to discuss how to deal with transference in the counseling practice was very important for me."

### *Learning in Interpersonal Relations*

One person commented, honestly,

"My preoccupation in getting a hold of my personal experience did not permit me to get a good sense of the group."

Nevertheless, we can find indications of interpersonal learnings in the *Encuentro*. For example, one participant observed,

"I can understand others better and mainly I can also accept when I don't understand. Not always I am able to understand, but certainly I am better able to respect the other in each group that I live."

Another related that,

"I perceived the possibility of utilizing aggressivity constructively through confrontations and the free expression of feelings."

Another shared that,

"The more significant learning was to re-learn to trust. I find that I am always re-learning this."

One of those who came to *Encuentro* to recuperate energy, related that,

"I think that I had an important learning in this moment, between others: to be open to the perspective of the other. Perhaps to be really empathic. And to live the encounter really taking into account the other. The other isn't better but he is equally important. . . I am enjoying the discovery of the process of giving, simply giving, without eminent expectation of return."

Others concluded that interpersonalness was not merely an attribute of humanity but *is* humanity. For example,

"To be in contact with our own experiences is the same as to be in contact with the other or with the group, since they are part of us."

And another put it,

"[The experience of the *Encuentro*] left me more sensitive to my and to the other's humanity; I feel I belong more to the human species. . . I returned with more availability to be transparent in various relationships and to begin to take better care of my significant ones. In brief, I perceive myself more available for others, for me and more ready to receive."

And another,

"I listened and reflected more on myself and I felt very good ALONE, in the company of me. I tried to accept the different positions and manners of BEING and TO BE in the world and was able to understand without judging and each day this makes me feel better."

Some people reported that they felt closer through understanding others. A participant expressed it this way:

"I was surprised to see people discussing things that hitherto I thought were only mine, so personal. And I was touched by this. I think that there was a communion (unity) between us, which did not exist in the other group settings. I went for a walk on the beach to reflect. I wept without knowing exactly why."

Not only emotional closeness, but through differentiation, an enhancement of personal values was also reported,

"I was able to feel closer to certain persons. . .and more distant to others."

### *Sexual Relations*

The subject of sexual relations, usually controversial and rarely mentioned, was touched on by several participants. For example, one participant said,

"References that came to me concerning the intense hidden sexual activity between different members caught my interest. Perhaps this should be a subject to reflect on."

Another stated,

"More people who were involved in intimate relationships in the end were more able to share this with others, although not in the large group meetings. In the beginning they either were not involved intimately or they were trying to hide their love relations, including me."

And another observed,

"The group was continually more eroticized, each time occurring more erotic situations of all types: triangles, incest, seduction, platonic, etc."

## PERCEPTIONS OF TIME & SPACE, SHARED VALUES, COLLECTIVE BEHAVIOR

### *Space: The Environment*

Also, there are indications of a sensitivity to the influence of the environment on participants' experiences. Many people mentioned the sea, the beach, the starry nights. Some examples:

"Of the first two days the image that remains with me is of the beach. . ."

"The sea was a dimension of energy, beauty and melody."

"I treated myself with care by abundant swimming in the sea and the swimming pool."

And, another person mentioned the effect of activities which are infrequently considered part of events such as the *Encuentro*:

"Some of the behind-the-scenes activities (such as occurred around the birthday of Carmen) helped demonstrate to me that there will always exist mini-groups and that one can belong or not depending on how secure the group is."

### *Culture: Shared Values*

With this last observation, we enter also the area of culture. In the many "international conferences in the person-centered approach" that I have attended, the *cultural* differences were much fewer than admitted. Differences provoked by language were largely circumstantial and quickly dispensed with after paying the customary obeisance to the inevitable nationalist who felt obligated to defend a dying empire's mother tongue and to the translators' self-serving needs to be featured in the limelight. The culture that prevails is the group culture. It can be noted that participants became sensitive to this,

"The group consisted of persons of three different nationalities (Argentines, Uruguayans and Brazilians, on the whole very young) who possibly had participated in previous encounters together and had consolidated friendships. I had little possibility to share socially."

{ Actually there were 7 nationalities represented in the *Encuentro*. }

One person felt he found evidence of cross-cultural understanding,

"I believe that the people from the northeast of Brazil giving in to the Argentines to hold the next *Encuentro* in Argentina is a good example of cross-cultural understanding. Personally, I was very comfortable with the Brazilians. The predominance of Portuguese language in the meetings required an effort from the Uruguayans and Argentines but was lived with acceptance and sympathy."

But one of his compatriots did not agree, commenting that,

"We did not arrive at a primary unity beyond nationalities and regionalisms."

One person felt a distinct lack of intercultural understanding.

"In my case, my main interest was to understand the other participants from their point of views. Nevertheless, I did not feel understood myself, interculturally. When I shared my expectations and my desire that the objectives of the group would transcend our present limits, some people showed they felt irritated, molested and uncomfortable. It did not occur to them to ask what was happening in my country and why I would like them to do so. My preoccupation continues. Perhaps I am overestimating the importance that Latin American helping professionals feel towards contributing to the mutual understanding and growth of people and to strengthen the humanistic movement in our countries where so much is done to degrade the human being. . . . For how can you talk about person-centered approach when the relation between the individuals at all levels is centered on authority? . . . This was what I wanted to discuss. Perhaps for us it is better to be directed, perhaps the best political scheme that fits us is the dictatorship and the humanistic perspective is only rhetorical."

Nevertheless, others perceived a significant transformation of the culture of the *Encuentro*.

One person described,

"A new culture whose languages was "portunhol" and that communicated as well as possible thoughts *and* feelings [was formed]. . . . This is how I see it, with the group process being a process connected to the external reality, in this case the Latin American reality." <sup>(3)</sup>

This perspective was challenged by another,

"I still don't know if I understand this thing about 'Latin American-ness'. A Latin American conference must deal with Latin American subjects? Or is this only a geographic criterion, of proximity? What do we Latin Americans have in common? The things we are lacking? Lack of democracy, lack of respect for human dignity, lack of attention to education, to health, lack of food? Are we united through these deficiencies? Thus, if a group of persons without mother or father meet together, they formulate and institutionalize an 'orphanage.' We are together because we have the same deprivation? Or because we have the same needs for democracy, dignity, education, health, food? These needs are typically Latin American or are they human necessities of every person? . . . Uniting ourselves through what we lack seems to me decreeing our own failure; as if we would not have united through our potency, but through our impotency. We are such poor little things. Whereas, if we unite through our potent characteristics (that are characteristics of all people and not only Latin Americans), finally we are able to create."



One person commented on the experience of meeting a few persons who had previously attended other Latin American encounters in which this participant was also present:

"It is interesting and delightful to get together with people that are also part of this process. In most cases, I don't know anything about their personal daily life outside of these meetings. But I know a lot about the person, the person that he or she is in that space. . . . They are persons that I meet each year, every two years and they have such big importance in my life and I in theirs. And when a new *Encuentro* begins it is as if the previous one had only ended yesterday."

#### *Trans-Individuality*

Also a perception of the group as a system that behaves cohesively can be found in the commentaries. One example:

"I had the impression that the group as a whole was present in every moment. I felt that the group was with me in every instant, not only when the large group met, but also when I was alone, with only one other person or with a small group. This group of which I speak was not formed by these or those persons. It was as if it were something *beyond* those individuals that together formed the group, as if it were an organism that had its own identity independent of the particularities of those who formed it. And for that reason, I don't think it was very important, if some persons felt more integrated in the group than others. Even those more quiet, more isolated, more alienated with respect to the group, were a part of it with their silence, their isolation, their alienation. I believe that it doesn't work to believe oneself to be outside the group when one is in it. To be alienated, isolated, silent already are ways to be in the group. I think that I am speaking of the unity that I felt in the group even when someone said that it still wasn't a group. Already we were a group when we actually met together in La Pedrera, and none of us was immune to its effects, neither from leaving nor staying to the end. I see the group as a sharing. We can share at many different levels. From the beginning at La Pedrera we were sharing the same space, the same food, the same beach, we already were a group."

And, how this system made decisions and regulated itself or did not regulate itself was frequently commented on. For example, one person thought that the problem of cigarette smoking was resolved creatively: people smoking would stand by the window and afterwards would return to the circle of participants in the center of the room. Others, however, thought that the matter was not really dealt with effectively. One participant observed,

"Both the smokers and the non-smokers seemed to consider the problem as an esthetic one (smoking is ugly or dirty) or as a moral question (smoking is bad) instead of discussing how to deal with a practical problem: how to provide the quality of air that each participant desired. Very little discussion took place and after an initial conformance with the requests of the non-smokers (to smoke by a window), the smokers seemed to feel they had earned the right to return to smoking in the group by having submitted to the morality of the non-smokers. The non-smokers at this point felt insulted that smokers were not following the established rule. The question did in fact become a moral one. This rendered the problem more difficult to resolve than had no solution been proposed. Anyone who would want to reopen the discussion would have to exert a superhuman effort to get the two sides to search out an intelligent solution. Likewise, the decision for the choice of location for the next *Encuentro* suffered a similar failure by not discussing all the points of view. Before either group -- the Argentine or the northeastern Brazilians -- or anyone else could sufficiently present their feelings and thoughts, disinterested persons rallied the group to take a vote."

Another thought that the group was,

"a little disorganized and impatient and inconsistent in its decisions (as to presenting or not presenting written work at the next *Encuentro*, as to the location of the next *Encuentro*, as to each participant providing copies of their papers, as to policy about videotaping the meetings). It seems there was a greediness for emotional harmony, for affective cohesion, that drove the group not to invest too much 'intellectual energy' in decision-making, perhaps in order not to dismantle the emotional atmosphere, constructed through painful effort. . . .As if there were a preconception against 'thinking decisions,' as if there were a certain dread of divergencies, and it were necessary to pass over them rapidly in order to return to 'goodness' . . .If there isn't trust, the tendency is to make decisions by 'majority rule,' that doesn't seem to be the best criteria. Majority of persons present, or majority of 'pressures' exerted by the favored group members."

Thus, there are indications of "the individual in the group," of the "group in the individual" and of an isomorphism -- group and individual as one,

"We see ourselves reflected in the group that is a part of us, at the same time that we are a part of it. To be in contact with our own experiences is the same as to be in contact with the other or with the group since they make part of us."

### PERCEPTIONS BEYOND TIME AND SPACE

#### *Transpersonal Reality*

One may note perceptions of a transpersonal reality in the commentaries. One person observed,

"I confirmed that these encounters really make me feel in contact with the 'Other.' I am each time more 'religious.' For me, these encounters repeat the beginning and the end of the world."

At times this illumination came out of a negative experience. One person related,

"I did not know exactly what it would be to encounter, but it suddenly appeared to me with the people discussing the silence the first time the group met. I felt as if that were a grand illusion, that the people did not have the capacity to see something larger that involved them and they would limit themselves to foolish discussions."

One person realized, it seems, the effect of a transpersonal experience,

"We were talking on the beach. . . we sat down and I heard myself saying things that I did not know that I knew, with a startling tranquility."

And, another expressed,

"In this *Encuentro* everything was very clear to me. It is as if I had succeeded in closing an important cycle. . . .The sensation of almost total identity is startling, it is like a wave that in order to be fulfilled throws itself into its own tidal ebb. What I feel like doing is to weep, but it is neither from sadness nor joy. Perhaps the joy would be in those moments when this could be shared. They are rare moments which I still do not know how to find. Far from here, right here, the craziness of the traveler is full of wisdom. It surprises me to feel so different and at the same time it gives me an immense tranquility, it is as if I were succeeding in being in touch with my center. I have the sensation of magnetism, I am able to feel what attracts and what repels. I don't have to think from here the thought that restrains me, that criticizes me. At the same time, I ask myself from where does this certainty come, this perception of time without limits?"

### *Trans or Trance? A Less "Real" Reality?*

Other indications of altered states of consciousness may also be found in the commentaries. One person noted an alteration of the perception of time,

"I have the sensation that this is like an island in time, a sort of dream. A week or a century, I could not measure."

Others also shared similar experiences,

"I had the impression of a lot of time passing, not merely a week. It was a sensation of having lived outside of reality, suspended in time and space."

Another recounted a perception involving physical sensation,

"I perceived in me. . . something related to energy, as if it had been used up (or sucked out) by the participants, and I needed to recuperate it since I felt extremely tired."

One person expressed concerns about this aspect of the phenomenon of group,

"I feel certain reservations about *Encuentros* such as this. Such sensations, although confusing intellectually, seem to me to be 'situational reactions' . . . that are not congruent with the person's perceptions, conduct and reflections outside of the group setting. Surely this does not apply to everyone, but particularly it applies to some of the excessive affection and acceptance."

Another participant also perceived alterations of consciousness; however, this person believes this did not effect the ability to function logically,

"In this [intense group interaction] I surrendered considerably, I was very conscious of how I let myself go with the process. In this way I could experience in myself very strong feelings in the group. Like the chaos, at 2 A.M. in the morning, the group still meeting. The perception of my own power in proposing a group meeting during the daytime. The sensation of experiencing feelings that I don't know at what point they are mine or another's. The certainty of living things, that at the same time they are mine, are of the group also. The practice of being aware of this process in groups is what I believe makes me, when I return to my private practice, an excellent psychotherapist. I return more in contact with myself. . . . Although I had let the process of the group carry me in the *Encuentro*, when I returned it still seemed real and genuine. It did not make me loose the notion of reality. The decisions I took during the *Encuentro* make sense back home – with different perspective, of course."

### *A Reality More "Real"?*

A participant related the following,

"I saw some courageous, some wounded, some rejuvenated and living crazy fantasies and some other ones risking. This makes me admire them more, but not on a mystical level (as I had seen them before), but much more human. . . . The relations are lived (as I see it) within a greater reality. The key word for this *Encuentro* was (for me) "demystification": mine, me in relation to myself, me in relation to others, others towards me. This demystification is related to freedom: of being and doing, searching creatively through meeting when the traditional approaches do not function."

Another commented,

"It was not an island inserted in a different reality. It was a hard life process that took place in La Pedrera, more for some than for others, depending on the degree [to which] they took care of themselves."

Another agreed,

"I discovered that what happened to us was also life, with difficult moments, with cowardness, with aggression. It is worth saying that we had agreeable moments and others which were not, and that we allowed ourselves the freedom to experience and express almost all the feelings, emotions and passions that lead our lives."

### *Creativity*

Also indications of creativity could be found. During the workshop, a small group had written the words and music for a performance which they presented at the birthday celebration of one of the participants. Their song expressed humor and insight regarding the major events of the *Encuentro* up to that moment.

One of the members of this group described a personal experience of participating in this creative production,

"It was the only moment in which I felt myself completed, totally immersed in the experience, liberating my artistic creativity and playfulness, as if I and the group were one thing only."

In terms of the lack of creativity in the large group meetings, one participant related,

"I was disappointed and shocked. It did not seem that they wanted to innovate -- only to repeat what they already knew: sit together, smoke and express opinions. They were comfortable with the certainty of uncertainty, with what they are accustomed to: none knows what will happen, but whatever it will be, it will happen within this known structure."

Another apparently agreed and offered this comment,

"I intuit that something is happening in professional groups and it has to do with the role of professional. I intuit that it has to do with roles that stick to us and that we fall into and it has to do with power, in the sense of political manipulation, with the power of control and has to do with the sense of *deja vu* that we have through the years. Thus, we cannot escape the role of facilitator that sticks to our skin. The old dilemma. To have to facilitate or not. Role or authenticity, etc. I think that all this has to do with losing freshness. There are always things to learn and above all they don't come through our old cliches: lectures to the group, endless haggling, long winded speeches."

Another added,

"It seems that many people can only conceptualize the *Encuentro* as group therapy. Perhaps this preconceived stance of making facilitative interventions and sharing polished personal anecdotes in order to animate the group, more than anything else, has prevented the group from becoming anything more than bad psychotherapy."

Another person, however, observed various creative acts occurring in the *Encuentro*, but not necessarily within the large group meetings,

"I think that the group resolved its conflicts on various occasions in a way that was not explicit or verbalized. For example, there was the change of quarters, the rearrangement of tables in the dining room, the flexible hours of the large group meetings, all this during the whole time of the *Encuentro*."

And another remembered an event in the large group meeting that this person considered to be creative,

"I think the work of art [installation] presented to the organizing committee at the end was extremely creative and integrative. In the beginning someone put a mattress from the couch covered with strange and unrelated objects on the floor. It looked more like a macumba offering, with cooking pots, bones, leaves, etc. After that I designed that

'Alondra' of peace (did you know Alondra is the name of a bird?), I think that there erupted an opportunity to integrate all expressions and all or many people got up and added to and modified the design such that something highly creative and integrative resulted."

### *Reflections on the Meaning of Life*

Some participants also reflected on the meaning of their lives. For example, one recalled,

"In these days I thought a lot about all of life: relationships, profession and day-to-day."

And another commented,

"It gave me serious motives for continuing to work as I work, to live as I live, believing in what I believe in." And this reaction was shared by people who had negative experiences as well as those who had positive ones.

Another expressed that,

"I feel stronger to live. . . to 'taste' internally that it is worthwhile to live."

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Participant's perceptions of the *Encuentro* reveal much about the phenomenon of group. For example, the participants' motives were varied: to socialize, rest, learn. The large group encounters were emotional: a source of both frustration and euphoria. The meetings were often chaotic and although creative moments were realized, much talent was wasted. Nevertheless, participants realized new perceptions of wholeness, interconnectedness and insights into life and its meaning.

Many reported psychotherapeutic effects such as improved understanding and appreciation of self and others. Relationships were improved. The ambience was a strong factor in the experience. People were aware of the distinctions between cultures as they began and the culture that eventually developed in their gathering.

A perception of the group as a whole was apparent in the commentaries. Many felt a confluence between the "group consciousness" and their individual consciousness. How the group governed itself and the quality of its decisions were observed. Transpersonal experiences that involve unusual perceptions (sometimes in altered states of consciousness) were noted.

These subjective views must provoke many thoughts in those unfamiliar with such events. One thought that may be worth considering is that activities such as the *Encuentro* have substantial tribal qualities. For example, there are the customary rituals. For example, in Uruguay the meetings of the general assembly frequently began with a prolonged almost sacred silence. The traditional large group meetings, in spite of the apparent disorganization, the chaotic discussions and epidemic emotionality were regarded as the only formality of the *Encuentro*.

The hyperaesthesia common to tribal celebration and ritual may also be observed in such activities as the *Encuentro*. Some participants, often initiates, from lack of sleep, eating irregularly, prolonged dancing and other consequences of the heightened emotional atmosphere entered into altered states of consciousness which resulted in unusual behavior. Just as in traditional tribes this may harm the individual or others or it may serve to help him explore a level of consciousness more elevated and become more closely identified with the group and the cultural values. In the rites of passage, one can find veterans advising the initiate on how to go about properly expressing personal feelings (always say "I", don't intellectualize, and so forth). Exactly what is and what is not the attitude of this tribe (that is, what is and what is not person-centered) is continually debated by the elders.

The tribe uses art also to preserve its story: the song to commemorate the birthday of Carmen told the story of the group and the art installation presented to the organizing committee also recounted the group's history and some of its values.

Recognizing this tribal aspect in behavior enables one to notice that many group activities take advantage of "gaps" in our education (such as the fact that emotional excitement, fatigue and other factors render one receptive to new perceptions but also to indoctrination and foolishness). We can notice how much we have and have not changed, how much we are and are not different from other groups. I feel that learning more about the phenomenon of group -- both from the internal point of view and from the external point of view -- can make the experience of group more meaningful and more useful to members of the group. Not only this, the group itself may become more useful to humanity.

As to the person-centered approach, it is clear from the comments of participants that the theory of client-centered therapy as such is not useful as a theory of the person-centered approach. It is evident from this *Encuentro* that it is becoming more and more difficult to fit explanations for positive outcomes into the popular idea that only the attitudes of the facilitator create a climate for constructive personality change. The fact that there were no designated facilitators in the *Encuentro* and yet the results are indistinguishable with those of other person-centered workshops practically finishes off this notion. Even if one attributes "facilitative attitudes" to some participants (which undoubtedly was the case), still the phenomenon does not accord with the theory of client-centered therapy. The heaviness or lightness of existence, the influence of groupness, of the sea, the results of frustration, expectation, the peculiarities of the culture, these people constituted by their presence together are all influential in the phenomenon. Since we are always part of groups (and sometimes ones that might be useful), there exists the possibility that knowledge of this phenomenon may benefit humanity itself.

## FOOTNOTES

1 Participants that were part of the Uruguayan organizing commission which arranged hotel lodgings, local transportation and all the many details that permitted the event to take place were: Abidel May, Alondra Mendizabel, Graciela Eichin, Magdalena Bravo, Maria Luisa Blanco and Richard Griesser.

2 I am responsible for the translations of participants comments into English from the Portuguese or the Spanish. In this endeavor I received the invaluable assistance of the Brazilian artist Lucila Machado Assumpcao.

3 Portunhol: a contraction of Portuguese-Espanhol. There were no translations. Each participant spoke the language most comfortable to him or her. Listeners made an effort to understand the other's language and communication.

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