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‘DRIVING ON ICE’

When the world around us feels out of control as if we are *driving on ice*, we have found it helpful to connect with our reflective capacities to make meaning of what is happening both inside and outside ourselves. In our ongoing discussions, we have found ourselves returning to our group theories. The developmental stages of group therapy have provided us with a theoretical anchor for making sense of the events and tensions that inevitably emerge in groups at both micro and macro levels. During these challenging times of extreme turbulence and polarization, the conflict stage of group development, also known as the storming phase (Tuckman,1965) in a group’s life, sheds light on the group dynamics that drive conflict and the leadership tasks required to develop and maintain a containing safe group space where differences can be identified, explored and integrated.

Group theorists contend that conflict is an inevitable and necessary part of a group’s life, marked by a preoccupation with dominance, control and power. Rebellion is characteristic of this stage, with individuals appearing to have a common interest in maintaining control and power. (Rutan and Stone, 1984, Mackenzie, 1990, Yalom and Leszcz, 2020).

We can hear the echoes of the conflict stage in the current state of our world, marked by wars, extreme political polarization and encampment protests. In this stage, emotionality is rampant, making it difficult for us to think clearly and rationally, our perceptions of each other and events often distorted by fear and anxiety. Anger and sadness are two affects commonly expressed and shared. Not everyone expresses or demonstrates overt anger, rebelliousness or assertiveness. For some of us the emotional response is withdrawal, passivity and compliance.

REFLECTING ON OUR COLLECTIVE RESPONSES

Becoming aware of and understanding our individual and collective responses to conflict is an essential emotional regulation capacity. The sources of conflict in a group may include overwhelming anxiety, vulnerability to attack, prejudice and fear of exclusion, loss of control and narcissistic injury (Gans,1989).

Collectively, we are feeling the impact of the powerful rebellion, hostility and tension of these conflict-ridden times. Feelings of powerlessness can trigger impulses to act out our anxiety and fear resulting in hostile attacks, scapegoating and discrimination. Gans (1989) maintains that prejudice provides the illusion of knowing the other and reduces anxiety. Since prejudging is a violation of another's uniqueness, it often elicits angry responses.

The risk of scapegoating is high during these turbulent times. When we fear being attacked and rejected, we find a scapegoat to focus our hostile, sadistic and hurtful attention on. The function of scapegoating in groups is to protect the group by containing its collective anger or as distraction from anxiety (Rutan, Stone and Shay, 2014). Key to understanding scapegoating in groups is the unconscious defense of projective identification (Horowtiz,1983) in which group members attack those traits in others that they find unacceptable in themselves. Gans, (1989) describes how hostile attacks “can be understood as the indignant member’s first step in the process of self-confrontation”. We are called to humbly own our human capacity to harm each other and resist the regressive pull to act out our fears and anxiety by attacking each other.

Group leadership:

As group leaders we are tasked with the responsibility of creating and maintaining a safe therapeutic space which allows for the expression of conflict and differences (Yalom and Leszcz, 2020, Rutan, Stone and Shay, 2014, Mackenzie, 1990). It is essential that we protect and support the identified scapegoat and in so doing reassure the scapegoaters that they will also be protected from the painful feelings of fear, shame, humiliation and exclusion when they too might be induced into this role. It is also crucial to assist members in acknowledging the feelings they wish to disown which have been projected into the scapegoated container.

Yalom and Leszcz (2020) contend that when the leader cannot tolerate being criticized openly, this induces the group into scapegoating a peer group member, which is a safer way of expressing aggression than towards the leader. Therefore, our capacity as group leaders to hold and tolerate intense expressions of hostility and anger is crucial in facilitating a sense of collaboration and conflict resolution to replace power struggles inherent in this stage of a group’s life.

The leaders of the world could learn so much from our group theories!

Having Difficult Conversations in Increasingly Polarized Contexts

Thanks to the support of The Canadian Group Psychotherapy Foundation, we were recently able to offer an online panel discussion addressing the polarized climate in which we all find ourselves, [*Having Difficult Conversations in Increasingly Polarized Contexts*.](https://youtu.be/OYnHubM01-E) So many of our recent discussions focused on the struggles we were experiencing both in our clinical and education settings as well as our wider communities. We believed (and hoped) it might be both a grounding and creative process to reach out to our fellow group leaders and esteemed mentors to help provide us with a framework for understanding our current struggles and potentially provide some guidance and inspiration regarding how to engage more fully and functionally.

We approached Drs. Susan Gantt, Willard Ashley and Molyn Leszcz to participate in a panel discussion where each would have an opportunity to offer their formulation and bring their particular theoretical lens to the tumultuous group dynamics unfolding in our current cultural context. The conversation that ensued surpassed all of our expectations and proved to be not only informative but deeply inspiring. It reinforced the immense value of returning to our theories as a map, and the importance of seeking support and diverse perspectives in uncertain times.

Susan Gantt launched the panel presentations by sharing her System Centered Therapy orientation. In SCT, a theory developed by Dr. Yvonne Agazarian, the foundational premise is that all living human systems survive, develop and transform by discriminating and integrating differences. However, we humans inevitably resist taking in difference, as differences introduce uncertainty which is then perceived as a threat to stability. Hence, we close our boundaries to the new and if necessary, resort to polarization and scapegoating to maintain status quo.

Susan suggested that in our current context of unprecedented change and uncertainty, our boundaries are often firmly closed to new or different perspectives, leading to ever-deepening divides between groups. She maintained that if we look at our world as a living human system, we are now in the authority phase of group development, a phase dominated by issues of power, control and hatred of authority. In this phase members of the group split over differences rather than seeing them as potential resources to integrate and develop ourselves and the systems of which we are a part.

Functional subgrouping was introduced as a foundational SCT method, designed to facilitate the process of integrating difference into a system gradually, thereby interrupting the typical patterns of splitting and polarization. Joining a subgroup to explore a difference together is the first step in building a system and involves opening boundaries and listening to understand vs. listening to convert the other. Curiosity is an essential ingredient in this process, engaging to explore and understand rather than simply reacting.

Willard Ashley then joined the conversation to share his valuable perspectives as a pastor, a psychoanalyst and a professor. He stressed the importance of building relationships and establishing trust as a foundation for difficult conversations. He spoke about cultural humility theory, which highlights self-reflection, openness and a willingness to learn about someone else’s perspective and culture. He also introduced the 4 tenets of his own Polarized Group Theory:

1. Listen to explore and learn from the other rather than listening to convert others.
2. Recognize the impact of trauma on all of us – “we are all traumatized souls talking to other traumatized souls”.
3. Learn to love, to respect our common humanity, and work to restore dignity to others. Disagreeing doesn’t necessitate splitting or trying to destroy the other.
4. Lead from a position of connection and respect .

Will stressed that conflict requires that leaders hold this frame firmly and return to it frequently when we are inevitably impacted by the intensity of conflicting views.

Molyn Leszcz concluded the panel presentations by offering his valuable perspective grounded in interpersonal theory. He highlighted themes and principles related first to the impact of dehumanization; second to trauma and racialized enactments; third to racism and fourth to tribalism. He shared compelling clinical examples to illuminate the need, now more than ever, for strong, conscious leadership. He suggested that we need to fight to see humanity even when our own humanity has been denied and we need to insist on complexity in a world of simplistic certainties. He stressed that we have to bridge divides by always returning to the goals and the mission of the group or the individual to consolidate the alliance and the trust and safety it provides.

Molyn shared important ideas about the responsibility of leadership, the importance of accountability and the healing power of repair.

He concluded by illuminating the great value of understanding group dynamics and encouraged those in attendance to ‘hold the dialectic’, to aim to see simultaneously both sides of an issue or conflict, to always pay attention to the dissonant voice and to aim to remain engaged and embrace complexity.

Overall, it is impossible to capture in a brief synopsis the valuable experience and wisdom shared by our panelists in this meaningful and timely session. Thankfully a [recording](https://youtu.be/OYnHubM01-E) is now available on the TIGS website for visitors to view at their leisure.

*duality.*

*both soft*

*and fierce*

*can coexist + still be powerful.*

*by Danielle Doby*

THE VALUE OF RELATIONSHIPS AND CONNECTION

Making Meaning

In a recent conversation with Joe Shay, we discussed how he has constructed meaning over the course of his incredible career. In the hour we spent with him on June 8, 2024, much was brought to light about the insightful and evolving process leading to his current views on psychotherapy or in his words, *"What I believe now."*

During our hour together Joe shared the fascinating history of his theoretical journey, critical moments and mentors, cultural and personal influences, revealing both heretical and well-established beliefs. Joe thoughtfully illuminated therapeutic understandings as they have developed during a lifetime of reflection, practice, and scholarship.

One of many observations that stand out and potentially underscore other reflections is "good psychotherapy is good anthropology". Joe recalled at one point in his career having the thought that "history is the core narrative of my life". This view led him on a path of engaging in psychodynamic psychotherapy which offered an appreciation of elements that shaped his life and personal world view while certainly contributing to future psychotherapeutic interventions with clients. He also spoke of the unexpected directions that our life paths can take by the at times rather random choices that we are offered at critical moments. A [memorable interview well worth watching.](https://youtu.be/pEfLhGfdhvg)

*here is so much beauty*

*in growth*

*change*

*and*

*practice*

*~ pursuit*

*Renaada Williams*

Acknowledging our Mistakes

One of the themes that arose from our recent polarization panel discussion, was the inherent value of our mistakes, when handled deftly, and with care. Our ability to err, apologize and own our mistakes, and take responsibility for repairing, can lead to a stronger relationship that acknowledges our common humanity.

In his forthcoming, ***Consolations II***- 52 new essays following the original collection of 52 essays found in [*Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*](https://substack.com/redirect/9f8a29e8-24f3-46bd-bed6-f5b979575491?j=eyJ1IjoiMmZmamVwIn0.5R9SNHm9rM2FYfvwSvFZKpkH9T5ACaQKvCd3Bx4ApsM), author and poet David Whyte offers his take on this concept in his essay, Stumbling…

“… Stumbling is an essential part of our human journey, some kind of instructive stumble is waiting for us now and lies just around the very next corner of our lives: sometimes, stumbling is actually essential and necessary: many of the experiences in which we gain compassion for others, can only be earned by limping painfully through them or at times crossing the line of earned experience by crawling on our hands and knees, so that we can come to understand in our very bones, just how much of humanity is already on its hands and knees every day of the year.

We hope not to stumble, we try not to stumble, we watch our feet and we watch the path upon which we place our feet, but all of us know it is just a matter of time: better then to help those around us who are stumbling now while we are still upright, better to know that sometimes the next perspective will come from looking up from a very low elevation at someone reaching down to offer a helping hand. None of us are exempt from a fall, none of us are immune from a stumble, in public or in secret. Stumbling is just a consciously, unconscious way of stopping so that we can try to start again in a better way.”

In a recent edition of *The Foyer*, The Art Gallery of Ontario’s publication, they highlight an exhibition that honours *repair* as artistic creation. You can see the full [article here.](https://readfoyer.com/article/art-visible-mending-arounna-khounnoraj?utm_source=AGO+email+communications&utm_campaign=656c139506-Foyer_2024_05_23&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_-f5f1e127f1-%5BLIST_EMAIL_ID%5D)

We came across an article by Elizabeth Lesser, in Maria Shriver’s *Sunday Paper:*

*“I Want to Be Water”: How Small Acts of Kindness Can Bridge Divides in Fiery Times*

*“I have been wracking my brain on how to be part of something helpful during these times. It's a tinder box out there! I want to be water. I want to “love thy neighbor”—even the one with the lawn sign that makes my blood boil; the one whose TV is always set to the “other” news station; the one who won’t vote; the one who will, but for \_\_\_\_\_\_\_??!! I*want *to be water, but I fail at magnanimous feelings and inclusive behavior every day. The divisions have become so sharp, even between people who previously agreed on almost everything. Landmines everywhere. How do we walk out of this mess without blowing each other up? Certainly not via the take-down culture of social media. What’s the point of smearing our opinions all over the electronic landscape if it only fortifies the ramparts separating us? … I am beginning to think that the most effective thing I can do as one human being in these hot times is to respond to everyday situations with small acts of cooling kindness.”*

OUR COMMUNITY

We have been grateful to *The Canadian Group Psychotherapy Foundation* for their support of several of our community offerings, including our recent Panel discussion on Polarization. Please visit their website to learn more about scholarships that are available to support their mandate of education, training, and research in group psychotherapy. <http://www.cgpf.ca/>

We’d like to end this newsletter with an excerpt from an article written by Clarissa Pinkola Estes (American poet, post-trauma specialist and Jungian psychoanalyst) in 2016, titled, We *Were Made for These Times:*

*“I grew up on the Great Lakes and recognize a seaworthy vessel when I see one. Regarding awakened souls, there have never been more able vessels in the waters than there are right now across the world. And they are fully provisioned and able to signal one another as never before in the history of humankind…*

*Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach … One of the most calming and powerful actions you can do to intervene in a stormy world is to stand up and show your soul … Struggling souls catch light from other souls who are fully lit and willing to show it …*

*In that spirit, I hope you will write this on your wall: When a great ship is in harbor and moored, it is safe, there can be no doubt. But that is not what great ships are built for.”*

Group leaders everywhere: ‘All hands on deck!’

Wishing you all - and your loved ones - health, peace and reprieve for the summer season ahead!

Respectfully submitted,

Aida Cabecinha, Susan Farrow, Maureen Mahan, Allan Sheps and Terry Simonik,

June 2024.