

Putting a Lion in Your Heart

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON A SENTIENT APPROACH
TO PEACE AND FREEDOM

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"The most fundamental forum is your own heart.

Both as a facilitator and as a human being, you must learn to hear yourself there.

Then you will know how to hear others when they are angry and hurt."

Arnold Mindell, Sitting in the Fire, 1995

INTRODUCTION

I have written this paper for anyone who has ever experienced despair when dealing with personal relationship, organisational or group¹ conflict. I am specifically thinking of conflicts that are long term in nature, that seem to re-cycle in society or from relationship to relationship and therefore appear insurmountable. I hope this paper will also be of help to all types of therapists, educators, life coaches and facilitators who work with relationships and groups and who wish to develop awareness tools that may assist them to transform difficult conflict scenes into more satisfying and vivifying experiences. Conflict is difficult to enter at the best of times. And when we are in the middle of an angry, escalating relationship or group conflict, Mother of Mercy, What to do? Scream louder, throw a bomb, weep, or run for the hills?

Process Oriented Psychology, or Process Work, offers a multi-levelled approach to working with conflict and provides the framework and inspiration for my work. The three levels of working with conflict that I will address in this paper are: a) consensus reality which is based on the constructions of who we are in the world and our socio-political beliefs and affiliations; e.g. heterosexual/homosexual, male/female etc. b) the interpersonal and intergroup level which addresses the polarities² that occur in our relationship and group dynamics; and

¹ This refers to group settings that are task oriented or meet with a specific purpose; whether for work, community, social justice, education or psychology. In my paper I have used examples of working with group conflict in community and social-psychological settings as a facilitator.

² Polarities may be viewed as elements in groups or relationship dynamics that attract us to each other or repel and separate us.

c) the intrapsychic level which focuses on our inner-life and our deeply felt, sentient experiences which are related to and mirror external issues and conflicts. I will be specifically focusing on the intrapsychic dynamic of relationship and group conflict.

Process Work is based on the premise that entering and working on conflict, whether personally or in a group, is **an act of deep democracy**⁴. Traditional Western democracy is based on majority rule, power of the people. Deep democracy, a concept developed by Dr Arnold Mindell and explored throughout this paper, extends traditional democracy by seeking out and valuing the representation of all our parts (the expression of our beliefs, feelings, values, attitudes etc) i.e. those that we may or may not identify with. The ones that we may not identify with or are less aware of are described as being more marginalised in our sphere of awareness.

We may fear or reject these marginalised experiences, however, principles of deep democracy suggest that they also require support and representation in order to make communication in relationships and groups whole. For example, when both parties in a couple conflict accuse each other of poor communication, what may be marginalised in the relationship is the “good communicator”, or ‘the listener”. This may sound simple but in the midst of stuck conflicts, these marginalised parts of ourselves and others may be far away from our awareness, particularly if we are primarily identified with being hurt. What we may be rejecting or wanting in the other is something we may need to be aware of and develop in ourselves.

In this sense, deep democracy is a valuable principle for inner work⁵, as well as group and relationship work, as it views our unconscious and inner processes as a holographic reflection of our outer relationships. When we give attention to inner states of consciousness that have been marginalised or unconsciously excluded, we may find they directly reflect and impact on outer relationship conflicts and social issues. Mindell⁶ writes about the importance of doing our inner work particularly when resolution is not able to be reached in a large group conflict. “Everyone concerned must consider the conflicting sides as two inner parts of themselves that are asking for an individual resolution.” (1992, 95) This is a way of finding personal answers to collective problems. The basic idea with this approach is that through exploring conflict, inner and outer democracy is strengthened and furthered.

³ In my paper this refers to the experience of vague feelings and intuitions that can barely be verbalised. I explore this in greater detail further in my paper.

⁴ The term “deep democracy” initially appears in Dr Arnold Mindell’s book on leadership and conflict resolution, The Leader as a Martial Artist, (1992).

⁵ “Innerwork” is a broad term and in this paper it refers to following and unfolding awareness of our inner states of consciousness. In his book on inner work, Working on Yourself Alone, Mindell refers to innerwork as a process-oriented meditation, where “you learn how to become a trained observer capable of helping yourself with your own feelings, visions, voices, relationships, movements, and body problems.” (1990, p.40)

⁶ Mindell The Leader as a Martial Artist (1992)

Democracy is therefore not only an outer political process, but also an internal, personal and interactive process. My particular interest is exploring and unfolding the inner level of conflict work known as sentience or dreaming. This is not just going into the intrapsychic dynamic of an issue but going deeply into an aspect or person within that conflict that disturbs or intrigues us the most. Sentient work could be described as a way of attempting to distil the essence of a conflict or getting to its core.

Following our awareness process on this level provides the opportunity of accessing a greater inner diversity and subsequently greater freedom around difference in our relationships. It is an attempt to get beyond content and into deeper qualities that have a more unifying effect. In my paper, I will be discussing two ways of exploring this sentient dynamic. The first is as mentioned, going into the thing or person we are in conflict with and unfolding the core quality of its essence as a means of learning about this aspect in ourselves. The other is through “blank access”. That is, by allowing ourselves to engage with something in our environment that may catch our attention from a blank space or a space of “un-knowing”. This requires holding an attitude of curiosity in order to unfold its potential meaning prior to any cognitive interpretation of what it might be. I will explain these tools of awareness in greater detail in my paper and through the use of specific case examples.

PURPOSE

Contribution of this Paper

As mentioned earlier, in this paper, I will be exploring and highlighting the intrapsychic aspects of deep democracy that can easily become lost in the heat of the polarisation of conflict—our sentient awareness. Sentience has been described by Mindell as a level of awareness that is beyond the polarisations and dualisms that create difference in our lived experiences. This level of awareness is sometimes experienced as a dreamy state that is fuzzy, non rational and more “sensing”. Some of us may experience this state just before going to sleep, just after waking or when we’re very tired and our rational, thinking mind isn’t switched on as strongly. It is a sense of something prior to rationality or cognition that can be difficult to articulate. Mindell speaks of it as the “continuous and automatic awareness of subtle, normally marginalised experiences and sensations.” (Mindell 2000 p.36) I am very interested in exploring these subtle experiences and sensations as a qualitative study of “stuckness” and power in personal and organisational

conflict. In my paper I will be looking at shifts in experience around conflict when entering a deeper sentient dimension. This will be discussed using 3 specific case examples which are:

1. Large group work: using sentient awareness during a long-standing and heated conflict on racism at a Worldwork⁷ Seminar in Greece 2002.
2. Organisational work: dealing with conflict as an employee within a large mainstream tertiary educational institution. I will explore this workplace scenario in terms of how sentient work helped me to transform a stuck conflict within the boundaries of the organisational culture. I will also discuss where I felt I made errors and didn't have a scintilla of awareness in the "soupiness" of the conflict.
3. Personal relationship conflict: using sentience awareness in a difficult relationship conflict. This conflict involved issues of gender and partnership.

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In all the above cases I am interested in exploring the issues of power, equity and oppression as a fluid, moment-to-moment experience; the only constant being awareness. Foucault⁸ spoke about power not being a static thing, but a highly mobile process. In any given interaction there are multiple levels, shifts and changes on who has rank and of what kind. Foucault saw power as "deployed and exercised through a net-like organization. So that we are all, to some degree, caught up in its circulation, oppressors and oppressed." (Hall, 1997, p.50)

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Sentience has been a key way for me to backtrack through these unresolved and difficult conflicts and connect to a bigger picture from which change and acceptance can grow. As part of my interest in the relationship between "stuckness", power and sentience I decided to include a case study based on my work in a Tertiary Education Institution. Within the equity and diversity unit of this institution there was a strong identification with participatory management and human rights. Yet this was where I suffered the most from a disavowed, autocratic management style that was deeply unconscious of its power and oppression. I believe it is important to include this case as many people suffer from the hierarchical nature of mainstream organisations in Australia and around the world. These imbalances, if not acknowledged and addressed in an organisation, can often result in recurring conflicts, workplace violence, bullying⁹ and harassment, mild chronic depression and low morale amongst staff and managers.

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⁷ "Worldwork" is refers to a bi-annual international forum that works on social, political and personal conflicts in large group settings around the world using a Process Oriented Psychology model of conflict resolution and deep democracy.

⁸ Hall, S. Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices, (1997)

⁹ Research on workplace bullying and harassment is relatively recent. NSW Workcover is currently doing a study on the increasing incidence of workplace bullying. Statistics for this won't be available until July 2004. For further information on workplace bullying please refer to my bibliography for websites. In particular, an article by Max Spry (1998) for the Journal of Industrial Relations.

This case study demonstrates the 'power' of sentient awareness in liberating or releasing "stuckness" from the level of consensus reality polarisations. Such a release creates space for a 'larger' engagement with conflict. This engagement is an act of deep democracy.

METHODOLOGY

My research methodology is qualitative in the context of a heuristic study (Moustakas, 1990).

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A qualitatively oriented heuristic study seeks to discover the nature and meaning of a phenomenon within a facilitated group setting and thereby draws out human experience. It permits the evaluator or researcher to study selected issues in depth and detail. Heuristic inquiry emphasises connectedness and relationship.

I am attracted to three propositions from the New Paradigm Research, (Reason, 1994) which embodies the qualitative nature of my work:

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1. We can better know the wholeness of the world through participation, empathy, commitment, responsibility, caring and love rather than through the analysis of fragments which generates thick, dense multi-layered descriptions and knowing.
2. The myth of objectivity is replaced by critical subjectivity (meta, deep reflection on experiences based on expanded awareness).
3. Knowledge is formed in action VS reflection, especially with others and particularly with different others (Reason, 1994, p.10-14).

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My hypothesis is that sentient awareness can be used as a tool for accessing peace and the release of stuckness in conflict situations. This work explores the following deep democracy research questions:

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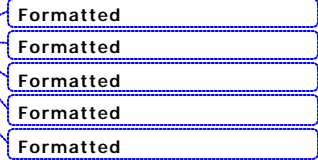
1. How do we recognise and engage with deep democracy as an inner experience?
2. Where is the meeting point between diversity and shared universal experience?
3. How are the outer aspects of conflict and power reflected as part of an inner dynamic? And how does sentient awareness help us deal with and gain greater understanding of this dynamic?
4. How do the dynamics of the oppressed and oppressor live in each of us? How do they most express themselves and in what contexts particularly?
5. What do we do when we are confronted with "stuckness" around difference in a personal, social, cultural context? How does sentient awareness support living our inner diversity?

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The case examples on sentient work that I use will be explored within the theoretical framework of Process Oriented Psychology. My intention is to make these tools accessible for relationship, community or workplace conflicts. This can be achieved in the following ways:



- As preparation before entering a difficult meeting, interview, conversation or interaction.
- As a way of dealing directly with a heated conflict which is confrontational and strongly polarised and where the people involved are not interested in processing their differences.
- As a debriefing exercise following a difficult interaction, in order to maintain a sense of self when things did not resolve or shift in the ways hoped for.

BACKGROUND OF PROCESS ORIENTED PSYCHOLOGY

Dr. Arnold Mindell developed Process Oriented Psychology, or Process Work as it's become known, over the last 25 years. As a young physicist he went to Zurich, Switzerland to study modern physics. Later he studied at the Jung Institute and became a training analyst. His research with dreams and body symptoms led to his seminal work on the "dreambody" concept, uniting dreams, body symptoms, and later relationship and group life into a unifying psychological paradigm. He subsequently founded the Research Society of Process Oriented Psychology. This innovative and integrative model draws upon Jungian psychology, world mythology, Taoism, alchemy, systemic paradigms and modern physics.

The basic premise of process work is that there is an underlying structure to all human experience. This structure is viewed as teleological in nature. Teleology is a philosophy articulated by Aristotle and embraced by Jung and Mindell, which views events as potentially meaningful and purposive, if unfolded and understood.

The process work model is also holographic in that it views night dreams, relationship conflicts, and organisational and world issues as emanating from and patterned by the same background field. This field is systemic wherein changes in one area of experience, effect and create change in others. Mindell has called this holistic phenomenon, the "dreambody", which is in fact a description of the unifying symmetry between dreams, body symptoms, relationship conflicts, and world events.

Because of the underlying unity and connection between levels and types of phenomena, the solution to problems are often to be found within the problems themselves. Another way of saying this is that if we explore and unfold symptoms and disturbances deeply enough, we will unravel their meaning and discover positive directions for change.

In his later writing, Mindell developed the concept of the “dreambody” by extending it to include the concept of the “dreammaker” and “the dreaming”. The dreaming is seen as an underlying unifying force or ultimate source of reality and awareness that exists within each of us and which values all experiences and parts of life. In this way it varies from consensus reality’s dualism and hierarchies of value and the power struggles that inevitably arise. The concept of the “dreammaker” also connects with the idea of deep democracy (explored later in this paper), in that it also treats all “...its creations, images and sensations as equally valuable and needed...It appreciates the nausea, the pearl, the earthquake, and the boss as all-important features of life.” (Mindell 2002, p.51) We sometimes experience this “dreammaker” through experiences such as synchronicities, but it can also become part of a daily practice in lucid¹⁰ awareness. It is a challenge to say with any authenticity, “I am all the things I notice and that notice me.”¹¹ Mindell describes this as a symmetry that “...manifests itself in a tendency toward inner democracy, that is, toward treating the different parts of myself as equally important; no part is ‘first’ and no part ‘second’ in an absolute sense.” (Mindell 2000, p.247)

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF SENTIENCE

The concept of sentience is archetypal in nature in that it leads us to universal patterns of human experience. It is a prototype or essence of experience associated with everyday reality. For example, the sentient essence, or deep core, of competition may be power or passion. In this place we no longer have an “us” or “them” but a universal experience. When “us” and “them” drop away there’s an opportunity for human connection. Sentience creates a background field out of which reality emerges. It has been described as the background hum to nature.

¹⁰ “Lucidity” is a term used by Mindell in his book, [Dreaming While Awake](#). It refers to a state of quiet, inner wakefulness and is drawn from his study of Buddhism, Quantum Physics, Aboriginal concepts of “the dreaming” and spiritual teachers such as Sri Ramana Maharshi and Rudolph Steiner. Mindell writes; “When you are lucid, you will notice that everything which catches your attention, everything, including sudden flashes, symptoms, relationship issues and world events, is preceded by tendencies, by the Dreaming.” (2000, p.16)

¹¹ Mindell, (200, p.247)

This pre-signal, pre-verbal level is at the periphery of our awareness and can really only be explored by allowing ourselves to remain in that fuzzy state while allowing our attention to follow the things that may “flirt” with us. “Flirt” is a term coined by Mindell to describe “...evanescent occurrences or momentary mental and physical happenings.” (Mindell, 2000, p.54) These “flirts” happen all the time and all around us and require us to look from a lens that isn’t so focused on consensus reality.

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The title of this paper, “Putting a Lion In Your Heart” refers to a quality of awareness that is able to fiercely and tenderly follow subtle, flickering experiences that most disturb, confront or intrigue us. I see it as a deeply democratic act in that it says one part is not better or worse than any other, they are all wild, sometimes unpredictable subjects of our intrapsychic jungle.

For example it may be challenging for some of us to look at the possibility of Australia’s Prime Minister, John Howard, the Bali Bombers or Iraq’s, Saddam Hussein as marginalised aspects of ourselves? Personally, I’d rather continue to see myself as a peace-loving, albeit concerned, bystander, living in the suburbs and watching it on the news. It takes courage, generosity and tenderness to explore and take responsibility for aspects of another person or group that are inflammatory to us. To view them as splitoff parts of ourselves and go into the core essence of what they represent for us takes a certain courage that can be confronting. Sentience goes further than just imagining these parts as belonging to ourselves. It suggests truly entering into the experience of that person or thing, getting to its core essence in an attempt to integrate it into our daily awareness and behaviour.

“Putting a Lion in Your Heart”, is a statement of hope and courage that one can experience temporary peace and freedom even in the midst of deep, stuck conflict situations that might normally lead to despair.

Sentient Level of Experience

Our intrapsychic connection to sentience is a connection to the “Big You” or the “Great Spirit”, the divine, the Great Mother or God in all its many names and forms. This is a way of tapping into an inner source from which we take strength or wisdom or whatever else we need to help us deal with our everyday issues. One way to foster this connection is through developing greater awareness of things that “flirt” with us. In other words, to train our minds to “notice incomprehensible sensations and signals from an invisible source. Some call this source nature, love, or community.” (Mindell 2001, p.48) Noticing and following these holds an underlying belief that they potentially have meaningful information for us in our lives.

We've all experienced these types of sentient "flirts" in our lives but perhaps haven't named them as such. They include the little flickering sensations we experience at the corner of our eye that have us turn our head and see that someone we know is across the road. A group example of this occurred for me during a large group conflict on racism at the Worldwork forum in Greece earlier this year. Members of the group were standing in polarised positions that represented "oppressed" and "oppressor". I was kneeling down holding a mike for a couple of women who were standing in the oppressor position. In the height of the conflict I noticed momentarily that the woman I was next to had large varicose veins across her legs. In that moment I got a sense of the vulnerability of the oppressor side. She was standing, listening to the anger and accusations coming from the oppressed side and occasionally responding. Yet on another level there was this vulnerability that seemed to be also present in her varicose veins, that I couldn't ignore. This could possibly be seen as a sign of de-escalation to the conflict.

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It was so contrary to the power the oppressor side was being accused of. To somehow bring in my awareness of this "flirt" might have been a useful element in the group process. I'll go back to explore and unfold my experience of this example in greater detail in my case study.

This way of "noticing" what catches our attention, and entering into or unfolding that experience is very different from the more consensual notion of rational processes. It is closer to meditation practices and has its own logic or rationality whilst seemingly appearing to be a way of following or attending to the "irrational" (see also Mindell's notion of "second attention"¹²)

"Flirting" is nature and the world saying, "Hey, over here! Look at me! I wanna make contact, I have some information for you." It's the recognition of the multi-dimensionality of our everyday world. And it's part of the principle of teleology to follow these experiences and unfold their potential meaning. We can ignore these "flirts" as everyday occurrences or consciously choose to explore their potential meaning by stepping into their reality and "becoming" them. This is an opportunity of getting to know their deepest and essential qualities.

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In ancient cultures this was often the practice of the wise-women/men, sheikhs and healers. These people would "shapeshift"¹³ in order to become the forms from which they sought wisdom and advice. Relationship problems in the community or illness were considered to be disturbed spirits that needed to be communicated with, exorcised and/or transformed.

¹² Mindell refers to the concept of following our "second attention" in his work, *The Shaman's Body*, (1993). It is a term derived from the teachings of Don Juan, the Yacqui Indian and shaman in the writings of Carlos Castaneda. Our "first attention is what we may notice in our everyday reality and our "second attention" is connected to our "dreaming". These could be such things as accidents, slips of the tongue and synchronicities.

¹³ Shamans and healers were believed to change their human shape into animals or nature in order to tap into their wisdom, healing and divinatory powers. In process work "shapeshifting" is a process of actively imagining ourselves changing shape into the nature or mind of what flirts with us. (Mindell, 2000)

Process Work proposes that we practice our own “shapeshifting” in order to connect with disavowed aspects of ourselves which are reflected as disturbances in our relationships and community. An essential part of sentient work is embracing our ambiguity and following our own shamanic processes. Julie Diamond writes that in ancient cultures “ambiguity of identity was seen to be the quality most important to maintaining and strengthening community.” (Diamond 2002, p.73) I understand this to mean that ambiguity gives us access to exploring who we think we are and who we might be. In these moments we may be John Howard, varicose veins or a black crow that suddenly flies past our window.

A Little Sentient Exercise

At this point I want to illustrate how we might work with sentience in a given moment, so I've decided to do a little experiment. As I'm writing, I feel that I'm faltering with my words and there seems to be a mood about my writing. I'm stuck and I'm struggling. When I go inside I hear a voice that is critical and says, “Eh, this has all been said before, what do you really have to offer?” I go to type but nothing seems to come out and after a little while I sigh and find myself gazing out at the trees outside my window. I'm feeling dejected and decide to consciously go into this experience of dejection. I allow myself to follow the strange fuzziness that has taken over me. I'm not focusing on anything specific and that's actually peaceful. I'm in a fuzzy bubble.

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This can also be described as a “blank access” – I'm not seeking out anything specific, I'm waiting to see what comes to me. I keep gazing outside and in my fuzzy state I notice there is a particular tree that seems to be ‘flirting’ with me. The branches occasionally sway gently as the wind brushes through them. They seem to be waving at me. Hmm, in this state, they look happy. If I follow this idea of sentience – going into the essence of things - then I see that this happy swaying tree is also me. I decide to change my perspective from looking at the tree to becoming the tree. I imagine myself going into the experience of being a tree. Stepping into its ‘tree world’. I feel an incredible stillness. When I go even further into this state I connect to a feeling of “allness”. I am reminded of the allness of nature—it has a constancy and greatness that is timeless. I'm relieved at the thought that I'm also nature and this allness is also me. This helps put things in perspective for me. It is almost imperceptible but my mood has changed in a very subtle way. “Yes! I'm a tree.” All things are possible in my “allness”, even writing a dissertation.

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What happened during this exercise was that I did not get stuck in the inner conflict of, “Do I have anything worthwhile to say?” “Yes, I do.” “No, I don't.” This would have been possibly

entering into a dialogue with a critical figure in a polarised way. Instead, I allowed myself to trust my state and follow the things that “flirted with me” or caught my attention. When I did this it took me into a different dimension, in this case into a swaying tree outside my window. Following this and allowing this to unfold gave me greater peace and freedom to go on with my dissertation, despite its inherent tensions and uncertainties. It took me to a place outside of the constraints of having to write. From the sentient experience the dissertation was writing itself, rather than me writing it. So here I am back again, tap, tap, tapping at the computer, but this time I'm a tree.

Comparisons with Other Models of Sentience

The concept of sentience is not dissimilar to concepts of “the dreaming” used in Australian Aboriginal and Native American cultures. There are many Aboriginal words for dreaming and attempting to describe it using the dry and abstract language of English can lose some of its subtlety. It has been referred to as a sacred time and space, a kind of *logos* or principle of order that is transcendent of consensus reality. The Aboriginal concept of “the dreaming” is also a complex of meanings that can in various forms of Aboriginal English refer to:

- The ancestral beings who walked the earth creating its physical features and to living species and the laws of their existence
- The creative acts themselves
- The time in which these events occurred, and
- The relationships linking individual human beings and other created species, places or events (Coombs, 1992 p8-9).

Aboriginal and Native American dreaming is a model of life itself and is seen as a kind of map or principle of order in which each “..part is both part of the whole and a system in itself.” (Coombs 1992, p.9) Western and Eastern paradigms, theories and philosophies use different language to describe this phenomenon. It is slippery to attempt to describe it since it is what Taoism refers to as that which cannot be spoken, Mindell has called it the “global dreambody”, Jung calls it the *Unus Mundus*—One World, Buddhists see it as our inseparability from all things and all beings, quantum physics refers to it as the quantum potential from which reality arises. James Lovelock writes about the Gaia principle “..in which all humans, plants, animals, minerals and the entire biosphere are part of a single, self-regulating organism.” (Summers 1994, p.54)

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The subtlety and uncertainty of language and experience is part of the sentient realm. It is both the experience before signals or parts and it is also the experience of having all the parts in co-existence. Australian and Canadian Aboriginal, Native American and African philosophies "...view consciousness and nature as comprising an indivisible, spiritual whole" (Summers1994, p.45). Eastern traditions constantly refer to the interdependent and inseparable parts of the cosmic whole. This ultimate, indivisible reality is called Brahman in Hinduism, Dharmakaya in Buddhism, and Tao in Taoism. "It has always been considered as essential for attaining enlightenment to go beyond earthly opposites and in China the polar relationship of all opposites lies at the very basis of Taoist thought" (Capra 1976, p.125).

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In the West, our separateness and independence from others is considered a sign of strength in individuality and coping with everyday reality. But it also creates isolation and suffering through our loss of connection with others and with nature. The symptoms we may experience within consensus reality such as exhaustion and mild chronic depression may be signals for us to go deeper into our sentience and the realm of the "Big You". The "Big You" loves 'this' and it also loves 'that', and it even loves the conflict between the two." (Mindell 2001, p. 134) Rhea Shapiro writes about connecting to her "Big You" as an antidote for mild chronic depression as it connects her with deeper dimensions of herself.

Mild chronic depression is epidemic in much of the West where sentient, non-ordinary, subtle experiences are marginalised and consensus reality is lived as the only reality. Shapiro says that to continue to remember the dreaming, sentient beings we truly are is a spiritual act in itself. "(Sentient) practice includes both a moment-to-moment and long-term awareness; staying awake to flirts that catch my attention and relating to the non-ordinary over time." (Shapiro 2002, p.82) Entering into and engaging in our personal ambiguity helps loosen up some of our social constructions in the mainstream. In these moments, we are no longer heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual, black, white or brindle. Our identity is made up of a fluid continuum of experience. We are no longer oppressed or oppressor but have the capacity to see the possibility of their co-existence in our daily lived experience.

Sentience As Deep Democracy

In a recent interview on deepening the meaning of peace Mindell commented on the conflict between Israel and Palestine. He said, "Affirm what you think, affirm what you feel, and then have courage and go deeper into your feelings of anger or desperation, take them inside and recognise what part of you is behaving like the enemy and stop that enemy. That's how to make change." (Mindell website 2002, p.3) Mindell was referring to our commitment to focus on aspects of ourselves that are intense and may even be warring. For most of us they are experiences that have been carried in our bones across generations. Every cultural group has a history of oppression, domination, slavery and persecution. Making this a daily practice takes a stout heart and faith in our capacity to change our relationships, work, community situation.

In his interview on peace, Mindell directly uses the example of people living in a war zone. He describes how people fear being killed by their neighbours or having to kill them, so that death is a very palpable experience. He suggests that another way of dying, in its positive sense, would be to let go of their identity, to temporarily step out of it. The next step for a person ready to give up their life is in a sense letting go of their personal identity and going for the greatest cause "which is not the destruction of other people, but the betterment of their own people and the betterment of all people." (Mindell 2002, p.5)

For the rest of the world watching a conflict such as Palestine and Israel, Mindell recommends acknowledging how this conflict exists in each of us. If the conflict in the Middle East is partially religious and cultural then we need to look at what we really believe in, whether we take our beliefs seriously and which aspects of our own beliefs we may be marginalizing. This is a way of contributing to the peace process. We stop blaming them for being in conflict and start understanding our own contribution to it as so called onlookers.

From a sentient perspective, the term "freedom fighter" used by social and political activists can appear contradictory. This "fight against" can risk placing the "antagonist" position solely on the outer which can limit engaging in a position that is beyond 'us' and 'them'. To push for change only from this level can be as rigid and antagonistic as the things it stands against and can end up as a battle of power rather than one for peace. Julie Diamond writes that *freedom against* suggests we are forever at the mercy of whatever we may be fighting against, which ultimately is a part of ourselves.

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Diamond describes **freedom against** as an “individual right claimed against someone else’s individual right.” (Diamond 2002, p71) Identifying with only one part of ourselves can make us “prisoners of our identity and of our predictable and compulsive ways of dealing with our oppression.” (Diamond 2002, p. 71) Alternatively, she describes **freedom to** as a positive freedom that has a power to create, not just resist.

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Positive freedom is a “non-material freedom” and an “unlimited quality” which allows us to access an incredible inner diversity. When applying the concept of the “Big You” to societal issues, work situations, personal conflicts and inner dilemmas we enter a non-causal and non-temporal zone that makes our differences and boundaries fuzzy. It opens us up to the possibility that we are the love we are seeking, the community we’ve been longing for and the world peace we’ve been dreaming about. This isn’t just the realm of gurus, shamans, saints and mystics—these are also us. In a recent interview on deepening the peace process Mindell says:

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“Peace is not antithetical to conflict; it understands things from a third viewpoint and sees how everybody is trying to do their best. ...It is a process of learning how to get deep enough in yourself, through conflict even, to see both sides as being somehow correct. When you have finally done that, then there’s no war. Instead there is fluid dialogue” (website 2002, 4).

On a polarity level we are getting to know and learning to interact with parts of ourselves and others that are marginalised within our personal and cultural identities. These parts are often in conflict with the mainstream culture, producing heat, passion and resistance within and without. In this next section, I look at the importance of “burning our wood” as a phase on the path to sentience.

I’ve Still Gotta Burn Some Wood!” – The Necessary Pre-Phase To Sentient Work

In our struggle for peace our greatest battle may be against our own internalised xenophobia. It is potentially inflammatory to have someone point out that your oppressor may be part of you. A necessary part of getting to a stage of fluid dialogue is to have “burnt some of our wood” or worked through some of our core issues relating to our personal history. Our wood includes all the beliefs, attitudes and experiences that socially construct who we are and where we fit in the world. Whilst some of these are obviously useful, others may be areas of our woundedness that may appear in trigger points and conflicts that tend to recycle in our lives.

Usually we need support to discover our core issues because getting to the core often involves getting to a non-rational and non-intellectual place, the place of our wounds. Entering into this place is to enter the original wound and it can be hard to navigate our way around this because of the many complexes associated with it. "Burning our wood" allows us to develop greater detachment around our conflict experiences. Dawn Menken¹⁴ talks about burning our wood as a way of accessing our spiritual or psychological rank, regardless of what cultural background, class, gender, age, sexual orientation religious or spiritual beliefs we have come from. She writes, "working on oppression also means reaping the inner benefits from having to deal with such pain. Individuals who have travelled this path are the perennial teachers of all time, for both the oppressed and the mainstream."(Menken, 2001 p.27) Sitting with strong emotions is seen as a way of strengthening our capacity to facilitate volatile emotions and assist with the development of deep democracy at a grassroots and psychological level.

Sitting in the tension and uncertainty of conflict both as a participant and facilitator is not an easy process, to say the least. Many choose to leave or not participate. Who can stand the tension and pain associated with oppression either in a difficult relationship or workplace scene? As conflict facilitators we need to be able to identify those parts of ourselves that get triggered due to past negative experiences in order to be there for others. Sometimes this requires doing our inner work while facilitating in order to be able to continue facilitating.

I helped facilitate a heated group process on racism in a process work training workshop in Adelaide in 1997. It certainly felt like a time that all my inner awareness had gone out the window.

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As the polarities between mainstream and oppressed got represented by participants I found myself pulled in to support the oppressed position. I started feeling furious at what appeared to be apathy and dismissal on the side of the mainstream group who were viewed as the oppressors. As a facilitator I had wanted to swap sides and support both positions in order to experience them both in the conflict. What was their apathy and dismissal all about? Did they feel as powerful as they appeared? I found, however, that once I was into the heat of the process I became very fixed on the "oppressed" side and could not move from my position because of the strong emotions I experienced around racism. It tapped directly into the woundedness of my personal story. I shouted, raged and quoted statistics, but I did not move to the other side as I had first intended.

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¹⁴ Dawn Menken has included a great personal example of having burnt her wood during a worldwork conference in Slovakia. For more information refer to her book, Speak Out! Talking About Love, Sex and Eternity. (2001 pp.25-27)

Then I felt guilty. I had suddenly noticed how powerless, vulnerable and battered the mainstream or “oppressor” side looked, receiving all this rage. People on this side had dwindled, voices were low, and hopelessness was being expressed. Yet I was unable to move towards them or be with them. I felt bad about this experience of being stuck in my position and raised this with Mindell afterwards. The ease in his response was touching and disarming. He said, “That’s right. It’s not right for you to do that yet. You still gotta burn some wood around racism and then you’ll know when it’s right to move to the other side.” As a facilitator I felt I should have been able to be more fluid around some of these core issues that had affected me personally. Recognising these issues and working on them with awareness is part of my personal development which helps loosen up my freedom to engage with them. Sometimes the only remedy for this is time.

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Having burnt some of our wood allows us to be aware of the moments when we don’t carry the same charge over old issues. We may notice greater detachment in the way we engage with them or perhaps not engage with them at all. Here are some questions we might ask ourselves in order to raise awareness around any wood which may require a burning:

- Who or what do you hate? What do you hate about them – be really specific? Go into the deepest essential quality of this experience?
- Where have you been wounded in the past? What was the core of this wound?
- What triggers you in your daily life? Where do you have an emotional charge? How do you deal with this? What helps you?
- Take one area and follow it to its origins: Where did it start? Have the courage to go far enough back to get to the core issue. Who were the key players in this scenario? What didn’t you say/do/feel in those moments? What got marginalised? How did you get through?

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Sentience As A Tool In Conflict Resolution

In many of the group processes I have been involved in where organisational, social and political issues are worked on, there is a tendency for several key people to come forward and give voice to minority or marginalised positions. While this is happening, others people are generally quiet but hold a container for the dialogue to occur, which can at times be raw, passionate and chaotic. Everyone in the group, though, through their spoken and unspoken words, thoughts and feelings create the group atmosphere and dynamic.

This group atmosphere includes varying degrees of attraction, repulsion or neutrality to what is being said. From this atmosphere and dynamic, polarities may already be forming but not yet made visible. One of the underlying values inherent within the process work paradigm is that of hashing it out and sitting *with* the tension of conflict, rather than aiming for resolution. But to hold this tension when in the middle of heated conflict requires having a perspective on conflict that is primarily interested in following and unfolding conflict, rather than in its resolution.

The underlying belief is that by following our awareness in the middle of a heated conflict we can deepen our understanding of ourselves and each other. It is therefore not so focused on resolution. No part is marginalised in this approach, including loudness, anger, chaos and despair. This in itself is an act of deep democracy and can lead to resolution since conflict tends to fall away when all voices are represented. This kind of engagement becomes a dialogue on the diversity of experience, rather than a focus on the tension of polarisation. The focus, as mentioned earlier, is for facilitators to draw out, support and represent voices that may not be represented or are more marginalised in the group dynamic. Their role is also to raise awareness when there is a de-escalation in the conflict as these may be signals for momentary resolution. Whilst resolution may not be the goal in this context, temporary resolution can be experienced when minority positions are given voice in order for communication to deepen.

Sometimes after hashing out a conflict within a given time frame, a shift towards resolution may not necessarily occur if the process hasn't deepened. What can subsequently happen is a state of exhaustion and hopelessness about the apparent lack of change. This lack of apparent change in the direction of resolution is partially attributable to the fact that not all voices or parts have been fully expressed, or that the parts expressed have not gone deep enough into their stories. This can be evidenced in the political conflict occurring right now within Australia on the Australian government's treatment of refugees. If politicians and we as a community don't go more deeply into the stories on the various sides involved in this conflict, then we run the risk of getting stuck in a good/evil, powerful/powerless dichotomy that represents people in a one dimensional way. This can then create a sense of 'stuckness' that I have described which leaves little opportunity for change.

When participants in a group conflict express their frustration and hopelessness around what they see as an unresolved issue I wonder if their expectation for resolution might be a little naïve and unrealistic. Given that the nature of the circumstances related to some conflicts are long term and historically complex I also don't want to dismiss such feelings and concerns. As a facilitator I am interested in what generates the hopelessness, the high hopes/dreams in the background, and ways of addressing it.

For example, participants in the 2002 Worldwork in Greece forum worked on the Hindu/Moslem conflict in Gujarat. Working on this conflict was multi-layered as it necessitated identifying the historical aspects, deeper transgenerational stories, and spirits past and present that were part of the conflict. The group hashed out the conflict through attempting to represent the diversity of voices, beliefs and opinions present within the two, sometimes three polarities that organically emerged. The anger and despair quickly escalated between groups until at one point, through the help of facilitation, one group recognised its momentary social power and agreed to sit down and listen to the deeper stories of the other participants. This led to more personal stories by individuals and in particular to a very moving dialogue between two people of different castes. Voices lowered, tears were shed and the people involved expressed their commitment to work on their awareness around their classism. For all intents and purposes there seemed a temporary resolution to the anger and hatred prior to this happening. However, towards completion of the group process, someone said something that re-ignited the conflict and it soon mushroomed into a full-blown shouting match. At this point the time had run out for the morning process and facilitators were alerting participants of the time to break for lunch. The group broke up but several participants loudly expressed their frustration around the lack of resolution. In retrospect I think that one of the things that could have helped this situation would have been to support these individuals to go and seek completion through doing their own sentient work.

In a chaotic, passionate, angry group process, it is easy to lose awareness when things speed up or escalate. At the end of many group processes I've felt punch drunk, particularly when there has been a heated conflict that escalated quickly and peaked without resolution. Or when conflicts and accusations moved rapidly from one issue to another. Herein lies the conundrum. On the one hand, there is a desire to practice deep democracy facilitation methods. On the other hand, this practice invariably gives rise to voicing and expressing underlying tensions that are not quickly or expediently resolved. This lack of resolution can subsequently lead to hopelessness and despair about the deep democracy methods themselves or the pursuit of resolution of conflict. However, sentient work offers a way through this difficult dilemma. My second case example looks at this issue.

It is usually some time after a group process that we come back and address the sentient realm. This allows participants to integrate issues that have emerged from the group process. However, it might also be valuable to go immediately into sentience, or practice sentience before entering into conflict or whilst actually in the middle of conflict.

Sentient work has a unifying and integrating function, while polarity work differentiates and articulates background conflict issues. Thus, when groups are stuck in non-resolution and feeling strained and hopeless, one idea is to pause the group process and have participants turn their attention inward to locate their sentient selves. Re-entry into the group process might then be from a more sentient and inclusive space. This could be a way of strengthening a group's capacity to see themselves in all the conflicting parts, and not as simply polarised. I explore this idea further in my first case example. Similarly, sentient work may be useful immediately after a group process, like the one I described earlier regarding Gujarat.

When all voices are not represented because of timing or power differences, like the example mentioned above, then sitting with non-resolution is a tricky business. Sentience may provide a vehicle for sitting with these tensions and following our awareness process in order to seek a sense of peace in ourselves when we are disturbed or agitated by an outer situation. This may be particularly useful in a workplace situation where the culture of the organisation marginalises working directly on conflict. The language of the mainstream workplace tends to focus on strategies, performance indicators and measurable outcomes, there is very little tolerance for bringing in deeper feelings and hashing out differences.

One way of describing workplace conflicts is that it's like a chicken soup with lots of ingredients bobbing about; such as chaotic and unexpressed moods and feelings, the ghosts of past employees, and indirect management and employee communication styles. Taking on the role of facilitator in a workplace conflict can feel like we are the chicken in the soup. In other words, we may risk becoming the main target of the conflict if we identify or articulate it too directly or appear to support one position over another. Group conflict tends to have a stronger focus on the consensus reality or polarity level. In a group conflict, we are challenged to maintain our lucidity and fluidity around the co-existence of these levels whilst staying connected to our own inner experiences.

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Sentience, The “Big You”, And Individuation

Our striving towards balance and symmetry is a constantly evolving process. To work on conflict as an inner experience or outer relationship requires the development of certain feeling attitudes such as openness, curiosity, expansiveness, eldership, generosity and detachment. Another way to describe this process of evolving balance and symmetry is individuation, a term described by Carl Jung as “the innate tendency of human beings to grow into their unique wholeness.” (Jung 1959, p.29)

We are in ourselves selforganising systems that are evolving and part of a larger whole. The next step in our individuation is to “discover, feel, see, hear, and relate to the world as if it were a part of us, realising that we too are a part of its development.” (Mindell 1987, p.121) Returning to the theme of oppression, we might say that our evolving self grows towards greater balance and symmetry and this includes our ability to recognise that we are both oppressor and oppressed. If we embrace this idea, it can have a major impact on how we enter conflict. The old Buddhist saying, “the path of a thousand miles starts with the first step.” This may be a short journey or a long journey. Needless to say, it’s a journey to be had as part of our individuation. Burning our wood—our deep-seated reactions to trauma, injustice, victimisation and abuse—takes time and courage. To work on these aspects of ourselves leads us to an experience of freedom *to*, that provides us with greater access to neutrality. I use the word neutrality to refer to the experience of valuing and supporting all our parts.

PERSONAL CONTEXTUALISATION

Inside my eye is another eye
looking out seeing inside
your eye
looking in.

Inside my voice that speaks with spongy soft verbs
is another voice that shouts
Hayasdan! Hayasdan!¹⁵
Inside my song is another song whose words
I never learned.
I sing. I sang. The song inside is never done.

Diana Der-Hovanessian, (Inside Green Eyes, Black Eyes)

It is important at this point to say a little about my personal history. I feel it gives some background to the direction of my studies and practice of deep democracy, sentience and its impact on my personal and professional life. My journey, like many others is one of gathering and managing my personal power in the world. My personal history provided me with experiences of having to deal with the oppressive nature of power. This was through my culture and family of origin as well as through growing up in the 60's and 70's in a patriarchal, racist beach suburb in Sydney's north.

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¹⁵ Hayasdan is Armenia in my mother tongue

As a woman from an Egyptian-born Armenian background migrating to Australia in the early 1960's at the height of the White Australia policy, I learnt I was a minority that had to assimilate quickly in order to survive. I grew up in a working class suburb, which was predominantly Anglo Australian with migrants who had come from Southern Italy. Like many other migrant, working class families in our area, my father worked nights at a plastics factory and my mother worked long days sewing piece-meals in a poorly paid sewing factory. My mother also had an industrial sewing machine in her bedroom where she would spend long hours sewing uniforms and board shorts, whilst I kept her company reading stories from "True Confessions" magazine. The Anglo Australian community offered some liberation that my mother and I as women would not have had in Egypt; but it was also patriarchal and oppressive in its racist and sexist attitudes towards non European women of colour. This was a time long before Affirmative Action for women and the Anti-Discrimination¹⁶ legislation.

"Popular and academic representations of migrant women call up a range of images and associations, as the most exploited (in the labour market and at home) and most oppressed (at home) women in Australia, besides Aboriginal women." (Pettman, 1992, p.43) The assimilation process of my growing up manifested as confusion about and a dislike of who I was to the point of anglicising my name and lying about where I was born so I wouldn't stand out. My assimilation into the broader community required that parts of my cultural identity be suppressed, particularly as most people didn't know where Armenia was. My struggle with belonging, place and identity has created conflict for me and my family throughout my life. As a child and adolescent the messages I received about being a woman were around submission and sublimation of my needs. I felt pressure from my family to adhere to a more traditional lifestyle that reflected the patriarchal and conservative practices of our Orthodox Church and Armenian community. This included the expectation that my father would organise my marriage through a suitable matchmaker in our community. Freedom was something I stole when my parents weren't looking, until I eventually I stole myself away from my family home.

When I left home before marrying I was scrutinised by my parents who believed I had left home because I was pregnant. My absence was kept a secret in my family for several years and longer in the Armenian community because of shame. Many children of first generation migrants speak about having to live two lives and feeling they belong in neither.

¹⁶ Under Federal Legislation the Racial Discrimination Act was introduced in 1975, Sex Discrimination Act 1984 and Affirmative Action (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women) Act 1986

As a first generation Egyptian-born survivor of the Armenian Diaspora growing up in Australia, my cultural identity felt very complicated. I felt I would never be “Australian”, yet I did not know Armenia or feel Armenian on the inside. I know if I chose to live and work in Armenia I would be seen as a wealthy Westerner.

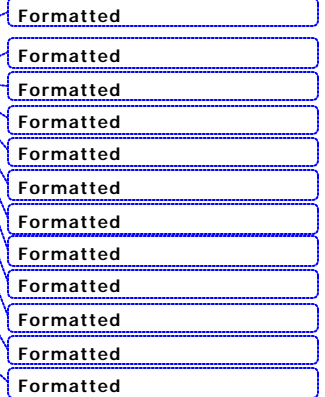
Some of the major nodal points in my growing up have repeatedly led me to questions of identity, belonging, place and voice. This journey has been deep and fruitful because it has led me to the conviction that I belong everywhere and with everyone. My “awakening of Self” started with my entry into Teachers’ College where I discovered I was not as stupid as I had been told. In fact I excelled in all my subjects. I was hungry to read about child psychology and sociology. I actively participated in student representative councils for women’s rights. I was surprised when a boyfriend accused me of being a feminist. It was meant to be an insult but I was both surprised and delighted. Studying at university for my master’s degree strengthened my connection to social awareness groups and my understanding of the politics of institutionalised discrimination. This is where I truly connected to my feelings of anger and wanting to “fight the unjust system” I’d grown up in. I was the underdog, the one who’d always felt one down. I became the freedom fighter who’d had enough and was not going to take anymore shit from my oppressors.

My cultural assimilation was also an important and essential way of getting to know the other side (in this example, Anglo Australian). It helped me access my own power. Initially, I saw power only in the hands of the mainstream, which I experienced as the oppressor. With this came feelings of anger, revenge and hopelessness. I both hated and wanted what I perceived they had. This was a wake up call that led to my becoming aware of my own power. It was the beginning of feeling compassion for all sides. When I am able to see both the oppressor and victim in all sides, consensus reality polarities loosen and become more fuzzy and I am more able to experience human connection. This is the place where our lion’s heart can grow strong with compassion for all sides and parts. This is certainly not a fixed state but a very fluid, non-linear process of subtle changes and loving patience.

DEEP DEMOCRACY, POWER AND CONFLICT

“Beloved community is formed not by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world.” (Hooks, B. 1992, 265)

Chambers Dictionary describes democracy as “...a stage or society characterised by recognition of equality of rights and privileges for all people; political, social or legal equality.” (Chambers 1992, p.273) The Greek word “demokratia” literally means “people power” (Mindell 1995, p.21). Deep democracy as mentioned earlier in this paper, is an attitude that is open all our different parts in it’s wholeness and depth. Mindell speaks of deep democracy or “demosophy”¹⁷ as the “wisdom of the people” (Summers 1994, p.59). It emphasises the use of awareness as opposed to force. It recognises the importance of including all voices and positions in a group or a community in order to create wholeness and sustainable decisions. It supports “even those parts, expressions or experiences that are usually pushed away, disowned or marginalised by individuals and societies.” (Rose 2000, p. 56) It is a model that promotes consensus based on an awareness of the relationship between groups or individuals that don’t always share equal power and can’t always speak out. That is why it is called *deep* democracy. It listens to all voices and not simply the majority voice and as facilitators it encourages awareness in supporting and representing voices that aren’t always able to speak out.



Worldwork is an aspect of process work that has been developed extensively over the last ten years. It provides a forum where psychology moves beyond the individual level and into the political and spiritual and connects individuals to the globe. It is based chiefly on the idea of deep democracy. Democracy that is governed by power but doesn’t have any psychological awareness of hidden signals or ghost roles¹⁸ can miss noticing many individuals and groups who are marginalised and disenfranchised. Even though laws are meant to protect rights they can be ineffective in preventing subtle or covert forms of prejudice and oppression by people in positions of power. For example, in Australia, people from Aboriginal, Arabic or Asian backgrounds are more likely to be harassed by the police, scrutinised by shopkeepers, denied rental leases or loans, and given poor service than are anglo Australians.

¹⁷ Summers, G. *Conflict: Gateway to Community* (1994, p.59)

¹⁸ A “ghost role” may be a feeling or mood that is sensed but not explicitly expressed or embodied. (Mindell, 1995)

When I was teaching a work opportunity program for women from ethno-culturally diverse backgrounds at a tertiary college, my students from Asian backgrounds frequently complained that they were getting served last by the Anglo Australian canteen staff at lunch time.

Women in Australia still earn 85% of the male wage. Homosexual relationships are still considered criminal in some Australian states and one of the most prevalent forms of indirect discrimination in employment is around people's physical size and appearance. As mentioned earlier in my paper deep democracy is sometimes described as having three levels: a consensus reality level, an interpersonal or polarised level, and an intrapsychic or sentient level (also described in Mindell's later books as "the dreaming"¹⁹). I describe these three levels below:

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1. Consensus Reality Level can be described as a level of awareness where notions of social construction take place, i.e., we live in a socially constructed world that forms our identities and the identities of the groups we move and live in. For example, this has appeared in the social constructions of conflict represented between the U.S. and Afghanistan or Iraq, particularly through its representation in the media here in Australia. The U.S. was clearly represented as the good guys fighting evil in order to make the U.S. and indeed, the world, a safer (better) place. Declarations of justice to be pursued at **all** costs was repeated on the t.v. and radio by George Bush et al. I was on the west coast of the U.S. at the time of the September 11 bombings and many supermarkets started displaying neon signs and flags with "God bless America". There was little or no media coverage representing voices in Afghanistan.
2. Polarity Level looks at the roles, ghost roles, dream figures and fantasies behind the consensual elements. Simply naming something as a consensus or a norm will subsequently bring up all the things that it marginalises or disavows. In terms of the tensions between the U.S. and Iraq, we would be looking at the polarities created through the beliefs, affiliations and roles represented in the U.S. and Iraq conflict. Similarly we would look at roles that may not be represented but are felt more in the mood or atmosphere of this tension/conflict.
3. Sentient Level (also known as the dreaming) refers to our most subtle and slightest tendencies—before there are even polarities or roles. On a sentient level there is no such thing as a world problem in a specific location. It is inside us. It is part of our potentiality and ambiguity. It is a level that is non-local, non-temporal and non-causal in nature.

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¹⁹ Mindell (2000, 2002)

This means we cannot say where and when these feelings, impulses and tendencies originate. If we go with the same example used in the polarity level, we might unfold this conflict by attempting to go beyond the polarities and more deeply into the core of the conflict. On this level, if the polarities are allowed to drop we might find raw power, not attached to anything in particular, but perhaps wanting to be lived out.

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From a holographic perspective these three levels are seen as interconnected and can appear simultaneously in ourselves and in the midst of a group or relationship conflict. Change created on one of these levels will affect the others. Within any group there are always invisible influences which appear in the moods, motivations, agendas, feelings, dreams, problems and history of the group. The historical and mythic aspects can include rules, communication styles, standards and methods for communicating and dealing with difference. These aren't necessarily articulated but tend to be assumed and felt.

They are part of the atmosphere or feeling dimension of a group that makes up its culture. This has been described as a group's field. An example of sensing a group field is the experience of stepping into a formal business meeting. This is the type of meeting where there's a large table in the middle of the room, people are sitting around it with papers and handouts, there's someone at the head of the table chairing the meeting and there's a mood of quiet in the room. Depending on our experiences with authority and institutions, some of us may start to feel reticent to speak in this sort of environment for fear of saying something stupid or wrong. It seems irrational, we don't necessarily know exactly where this has come from; we can't pinpoint it to any person or thing. It's a felt sense in the room's atmosphere that was created by everyone's thoughts and feelings and even the room's structure, i.e. the table, positioning of chairs, the papers. Often the effect the group field has on us leaves once we leave the meeting. Equally, others may find the formality of such a meeting as an opportunity to present their case at length, depending on their identity, preferences, aspirations or cultural backgrounds. In a group conflict scene the field can have a powerful effect on our thoughts and feelings and our ability to be able to speak. If we are feeling reticent, uncomfortable or stirred up it is highly likely that others are feeling the same way. Bringing in these thoughts and feelings can have a relieving effect on the overall field. In this way, following are a few concepts further explaining some of the structural dynamics of deep democracy in group work.

Roles And Ghost Roles

Roles are related to the concept of the field and are a collection of parts organising the background atmosphere. In the language of Taoism the field is “the way” or “the energetic tendencies that dream everyday life into existence” (Mindell 2000,11). Translated into process work theory, we must live according to both inner feelings and sensitivity to outer situations. Field awareness with group conflict starts with identifying the roles and polarities within the created space. These will include aspects or experiences the group does and does not identify with, as well as any marginalised roles. Process works calls these the ‘we’ and “not we” of individual, group and societal identity. E.g. if a group primarily identifies itself as activists for peace, then a possible disavowed role may be difference or conflict. If these aspects aren’t consciously represented they can sometimes manifest as disturbances in the group. For example in the peace loving activist group there may be the one person who always seems to irritate or disturb the group, if only that person wasn’t around things would be cool. Process work attempts to unfold these through drawing and fleshing out the roles or polarities with the group, giving them voice and working on the boundaries of the group’s identity.

Role theory originates from sociology (during the 1920-30’s by Mead and Cooley²⁰) and expresses the idea that individuals play roles. “Roles in groups are not fixed, but fluid. They are filled by different individuals and parties over time, keeping the roles in a constant state of flux.” (Mindell 1995, p.42) For example at work we step into our role as employee or boss, and are likely to behave differently at home in our role of husband, wife, son, daughter or friend. In a group conflict situation, facilitators may support the group to identify roles or polarities and deliberately occupy and speak from these in order to assist their representation and expression.

Ghost roles are feelings, moods, body symptoms or tensions that aren’t explicitly represented yet may be experienced in a group’s atmosphere. For example I recently facilitated a group process for staff at a community centre regarding a youth shooting in front of a picture theatre earlier in 2002. We started by identifying the different roles that were portrayed by the media. This led us to identify the mood and tensions in the background of this incident. There was a lot of sadness and grief. Some of the “ghost roles” that were identified included family and members of the community who weren’t mentioned, recognised or represented in the incident by the media.

²⁰ In terms of the major sociological paradigms, George Mead and Charles Cooley’s is a symbolic interactionist theory. Their theory dealt with how the social self develops. For references see: G. H. Mead, (1925) The Genesis of Self and Social Control, *International Journal of Ethics*, Vol. XXXV, No. 3 (1925) and C. Cooley, (1922) Human Nature and the Social Order (Revised edition). New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons.

Power, Rank And Privilege

Rank is the sum of our privileges and position in the world. Rank has nothing to do with being better or worse than anyone else. It refers to the way that a person or group is viewed and treated by other people, groups and systems. The word “privilege” refers to the benefits and advantages that come from our rank. Our diversity within consensus reality defines where we fit in the hierarchy of social rank, for example, our gender, economics, colour, religious beliefs, ethnicity, sexual preference, communication style, education, physical ability, age and health. Mindell describes it as a “conscious or unconscious, social or personal ability or power arising from culture, community support, personal psychology and/or spiritual power. Whether you earned or inherited your rank it organises much of your communication behaviour.” (Mindell 1995, p.42)

Rank isn't absolute. It depends on where we are and whom we're with. Rank²¹ can be *structural* (the boss), *social* (having more or less power in the social group we belong to) and *local* (having more or less power in any given moment). “The facilitator’s task is not to do away with the use of rank and power, but to notice them and make their dynamics explicit for the whole group to see.” (Mindell 1995, p.37) As a group, community or relationship becomes aware of itself, it often meets issues of power and rank.

In a group conflict situation we may find ourselves momentarily in a rankfull position where we could be seen as an “oppressor”. This can be scary and painful. We may want to argue and disagree with what we are being accused of yet in consensus reality we can also see it for its truth. We may want the other to see that we are more than just an oppressor, we want our wholeness to be seen, yet we also see that this is a luxury the other “oppressed” side doesn't have. We say we are sorry and feel deeply ashamed and ask what we can do differently, but we are accused of being lazy and unwilling to take responsibility. We want to say that we've also suffered and also feel oppressed, that we too hunger for spirit and meaning, but we are accused of appropriating theirs. Mostly we want the voices that are screaming and crying to become softer and calmer, yet when we suggest this it can inflame and escalate the other side's experience sometimes to the point of craziness.

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²¹ For more a more detailed list on types of rank please refer to Arnold Mindell's book, *Sitting in the Fire*. (1995)
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As a member of the majority in mainstream we may flee conflicts because we are angry or feel hopeless about making changes or because we are confronted harshly on our privilege. Those that stay can do nothing but listen and wait. This can carry a lot of pain and uncertainty as to whether connection will deepen or even be possible. On a sentient level this painful place can lead us directly to awareness of an inner dynamic that is played out in the outer conflict. In most mainstream groups I have facilitated, tolerance for tension and strong emotion is very low. We want to run for the chocolate biscuits (or whatever else) for ease and comfort when we are challenged. Most of us have family of origin backgrounds that do not directly communicate the emotions related to conflict or have avoided conflict.

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They may either be suppressed and/or come out with a volatility that never gets processed afterwards. The capacity to sit in the chaos and tension of conflict requires humbleness, patience and awareness of our power and rank. Like most things, we learn by doing. The capacity to sit with tension increases through sitting with tension. Accessing the sentient level of deep democracy may help us to build the capacity to sit with tension and use our inner awareness to deepen a conflict situation. It is also a possible way of finding inner resolution where it cannot be reached outwardly. It is a way of directing the conflict to another level of consciousness that is not intent on right or wrong. I believe this is a key element in working towards sustainable change and talk about this in more detail in the following case study.

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CASE STUDIES

The following cases studies describe some of my personal and professional experiences of sitting in the fire of conflict and attempting to access sentient awareness as a way through the trouble. Through these examples, I will attempt to highlight the different levels of a) consensus reality, b) polarity, and c) sentient experiences.

Case One: Worldwork Seminar in Greece 2002

My first case example looks at an international Process Oriented Psychology forum known as "Worldwork". Worldwork forums involve the sorting and facilitation of large group conflict using principles of deep democracy on a variety of socio-political issues. In this particular case, I look at the dynamics of social and global issues addressed in the 8-day forum in Greece in May 2002, with 300 participants from 30 countries across the world. In particular, I explore the possible uses of sentient awareness in some of the social conflicts that seemed to be unresolvable.

Introduction

To bring in the “dreaming” in a large group forum is an act of deep democracy. But why do we as individuals and groups marginalise this more sentient, dreaming aspect of our communication if they are an important part of deep democracy? It can be tricky or slippery to focus on our subtle experiences and tendencies, particularly if we’re not clear on what they mean. Mindell writes that, “...to catch actions and thoughts as they are arising from the background of subtle tendencies, you must have developed your mindfulness and concentration, which I call lucidity.” (Mindell 2000, p.11) This can become quite tricky when we are in the midst of a heightened emotional conflict scene such as a Worldwork forum.

On a consensus level you could say that for many of us, our deepest hope in a Worldwork Forum may be for peace or unity, and an appreciation, respect and understanding of our social and global diversity. Similar to many conferences I have attended, I believe that many people, if not most, come with a deep hope of getting answers, outcomes, and even resolution to some of their personal, social and political dilemmas.

But from the dreaming level, this may look like a whole other kettle of fish. At the Worldwork forum in Greece, I saw peacemakers and war makers who on a “dreaming” level were also butterflies, queens, mountains and frogs. Since we humans are such an incredibly diverse mob, attempting to articulate our conditions for, and visions of peace and unity, can create alliances with some groups while marginalising others. On a global level, the polarities that have developed from these differences have sometimes turned into war and terrorism. Some of the group processes during the Worldwork forum in Greece looked like war at times. The principles of deep democracy appreciates that people from minority groups who have had to keep a lid on social issues affecting them in the mainstream may express themselves more passionately when space is given to process these issues. In fact, it’s not just marginalised groups, all of us have, at one time or other, felt oppressed by what is valued as part of consensual reality norms. Our incredible diversity has meant that even people who seem to be affiliated in the same group may conflict about what peace, justice or unity means for them. Following are some of the issues that were raised during the sorting of issues at Worldwork in Greece.

These are the issues that were considered “chronic problems” by its representatives:

- Refugees and immigration
- Genocide in Gujarat and Hindu revivalism
- Homophobia
- Racism
- Pain of Men
- Women’s Issues
- Men and Women
- Terrorism and Oppression
- US Imperialism
- Smoking in Europe
- Child Abuse
- Environmental Issues
- Nationalism in Greece
- Spirituality and Diversity
- Age and Abuse of Elderly
- Class Issues
- Greek/Turkish relations

In a forum like Worldwork, these global and social power imbalances, some of which are historical in nature, are worked on through hashing out the conflicts together and learning group conflict facilitation skills at the same time. The consensual restraints of time and space mean that not all issues get to be worked on, and the ones that are worked on don’t necessarily reach resolution. The issues listed above give an indication of what might be brewing in the thoughts, feelings, mood and atmosphere of the group. A strongly recurring experience and role appearing in Worldwork forums like Greece is one of confusion. By this I mean that people may speak about confusion experienced around the strong emotions that arise in a group process. They have expressed feeling unprepared for dealing with the chaotic, volatile communications that arise between roles in the processing of any given conflict. They have also been confused about where the process is going. I am interested in this as I think it is a potential gateway to going into a deeper sentient realm.

Confusion is understandable since I don't think there's really anything that can prepare us for the intensity of emotion and the rapid escalation that can occur during the height of group conflict. Sitting next to someone you love in order to feel safer may be a start. Surrendering to the possibility of not knowing and trusting in the wisdom of the selforganising nature of chaos²² in groups may be another. But some people, including myself, have gone home not knowing how to integrate these experiences into their mainstream lives. More and more I am noticing the inclusion of sentient exercises in group forums like Worldwork as a more wholistic approach to deep democracy. It makes sense to follow our outer awareness with our inner and visa versa. Following is a case example of my experience in a difficult group process on racism which I followed up on by doing sentient work.

Working on the Sentient Level

The group process on racism involved a highly charged engagement between people of colour and an identified white mainstream. As participants came forward and started naming issues attributable to power imbalances in the mainstream, facilitators helped them move into roles and polarities that represented these. As voices started to raise and became more tense and accusatory I noticed a growing dis-ease in the group field and in my body. As an assistant facilitator, I was holding the microphone for people in the white mainstream group identified as "the oppressor." I began to get in touch with the fear, hopelessness, guilt and despair of this side. I also experienced the overwhelming power, oppressiveness and tyranny of the marginalised group who identified with being "the oppressed". This was very new to me, since I had mostly always stood with the "oppressed" group as I identified with this in my personal history.

There were a few really angry, vociferous women holding onto the microphone in the "oppressed" group with others in the background supporting them. As the shouting continued, I started to self-talk, telling myself that they had a right to be so angry and I should be more patient, compassionate and understanding. The intensity of their emotion was only a reflection of the level of the despair, anguish and imbalance they experience in their lives as a result of mainstream oppression. At the same time I was wanting them to quieten, hear and engage with the group I was standing with.

²² For accessible written material on chaos and the relationship between psychology and quantum physics refer to Mindell's, *Quantum Mind*. (2000) Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics* (1992) is also an excellent source

An elderly woman stood at the front of the mainstream side, listening, while I was kneeling beside her holding the mike. I noticed she had deep varicose veins across her legs and I imagined she probably had a story or two to tell of her life. At one point she said she wanted to come and stand next to the ones shouting on the other side and was sharply turned down. We as the mainstream side, looked on frozen, as if under headlights. I worked hard on maintaining my lucidity, let alone my consciousness. I started to feel physically sick at the barrage of fury that did not seem to abate. At one point, I could barely hold the microphone. I started to feel like I was being vomited on by the other side's rage. I wanted to yell back, I wanted to cry, I wanted to walk away. But I was compelled to stay put and listen because I recognised this rage was part of me too.

The tension abated a little when a facilitator suggested we just sit and listen to the stories on the other side as any attempts to engage were inflammatory. It was a powerful experience to stay put in the side that is "ugly", the side seen as the racist oppressor. This was not based necessarily on racist comments made in the group process but on the social rank held by the people in the "oppressor" side within the mainstream. Standing with a group we least identify with or have a reaction to in a group conflict is a great learning experience. I recommend it to anyone wanting to take responsibility for learning about their diversity and power. Sitting there amidst the pain and anger felt like a deeply democratic act and a taste of the positive freedom that Julie Diamond speaks of—it does however, require putting a lion in your heart and other lions you could talk to afterwards. By standing with the "other side" and experiencing its humanity I felt I was experiencing a shift from an old and stuck polarity; racists VS racially oppressed. This was liberating for me. I was shaken but felt levelled and humbled.

I find these group processes a strange phenomena in that you can find yourself afterwards during break time, standing in line for a coffee, next to someone you may have just blasted only minutes ago. What do you say? "Hi, well, you know that wasn't really me speaking out there, that was just my inner exasperated, blazing, monster who has been oppressed in the mainstream for so long it busted a fuse...So anyway, what are you drinking?" How do we maintain the continuity and fluidity of who we are and our connection to each other after such intense scenes? Does it mean that after a group process on racism we are never going to have anything to do with someone we see as mainstream or visa versa? Somewhere we need to find continuity of experience, whilst being sensitive to the emotional state of people after a group process. I think the key is that group processes like the one I've just described aren't the end—they are the beginning.

Following up with an inner work exercise is like sealing the juices of a well-cooked lamb. After the group process I felt exhausted and stirred up. I didn't feel complete in myself. I needed space to connect to what was happening inside of me and let some of the juices stirred up in me settle in my veins. I had felt a little stuck during the polarisation of the process, and appreciated that when in that place there's a risk of not seeing the signals on the other side, or potential de-escalation. The one sidedness of any position can disconnect us from the other side and can perpetuate the issues. It can make us blind to our local rank and the potential abusiveness of our impact. It is in these moments that I need to turn to my inner process in order to deepen the polarities that perhaps disturb, intrigue or interest me the most and work with these.

Doing My Sentient Work

When I made time to reflect on what most disturbed me about the racism process, I found the strongest image was a particular woman from the "oppressed" group who was holding onto the mike and screaming into it. At one point in the group process she was screaming about her culture being appropriated and shouted sarcastically, "Next, you'd probably want to chop out my bloody intestines if you thought they were marketable!!!"

When I went into my inner work, I asked myself how I experienced her. I found she wasn't really a woman but had changed into a hungry, angry monster with many arms. I stepped into this image in my imagination and became the monster. I was Kali²³, chopping down and devouring all in my way. As I continued to go into my experience, my movement tendencies developed into a devouring dance that wasn't directed at anything specific. I was passionate for connection. I went for it, grabbed it, and gobbled it down. I know I have a reaction against this part in my self; I criticise it for being greedy and needy. It's a challenge but also freeing to think that this is me - I am a greedy gobbler. The deep core quality of this for me is becoming a devouring fire, it is an energy in nature that drives us all. It is both creative and destructive—like Kali. Experiencing this satiated any desire to change it, if anything I wanted to know it and live it more. To live this more in my life would be to show myself more in all my passionate hungry emotions and particularly to show the times when I'm needy.

It is a practice of daily awareness to follow our subtle tendencies and believe in them as essential for healing. I believe we have to do this on our own, at least some of the time. It's a life

²³ "Kali, or "Dark Mother", was the Hindu Triple Goddess of creation, preservation and destruction – most commonly known in her Destroyer aspect. "She was the basic archetypal image of the birth and death mother, simultaneously womb and tomb, giver of life and devourer of her children." (Walker, 1983, 488)

practice. Mindell suggests taking even 10 minutes a day to do this. In his book, Lucid dreaming²⁴, he talks of how “non-Aboriginal peoples everywhere marginalise their own “dreaming”. Most of us living in mainstream cultures have learned to turn against and ignore our own dreaming souls. Mindell describes this as an internalised racism of most people in the mainstream. Marginalising dreaming creates a malady of the soul of the mainstream, and partially why authentic spirituality is projected onto Indigenous cultures. Dreaming connects us to our own diversity, including our Aboriginality. How do we bring this sentient level into a group process? What seems useful is for one side to consciously go down at some point and just receive and hear the other. This happened a little in the example of the racism group process. In these moments we have to make a conscious decision on what is better for the longer-term process. Do we want our opinion to be heard over our relationship with the other side? Which has more priority, and at what cost? Diamond writes that from an “...oppositional point of view, we stand up and say, “I can’t be controlled. I have to speak out, to say what I want, because I must exercise my sense of self, whether it suits you or not.”” (2002, p.71) This reflects the belief in freedom *against*, the power of resistance.

If our opinion wasn’t heard in that moment, how could we hold on to it and value it, in order to open up to hearing the other? If we’re waiting for someone to open up and listen, why don’t we become that someone? This may be the territory of the “Big You” mentioned earlier in this paper and provides an opportunity for de-escalating the conflict. I have also described this as a freedom *b*, a form of freedom that connects and creates, not just resists. Julie Diamond²⁵ describes this as a non-material freedom in that it has an unlimited quality. Similarly, sentience is beyond polarity in that it makes connection the priority through finding the other in ourselves. Connecting creates de-escalation—it’s hard to fight with someone you’re connected to. In sentient work we’re getting to know our inner diversity, including the needy or hungry ones that we’ve been socialised to suppress. It’s important to be able to work on and incorporate these parts into our daily lives and more specifically, to love them.

When we get to a level that’s painful in a group process, it would be great to stop and go deeper into the sentient dimension of the group. Whenever I’ve experienced this in a group process, we’ve gone a little slower but it has created faster change in the end. The slowness helps create a heightened awareness of shifts in the group’s feeling atmosphere.

²⁴ Mindell (2000)

²⁵ The Journal of Process Oriented Psychology, Volume 8, Number 2, (2002) A Democracy Dialogue, Getting to the Essence Freedom Lao Tse Press, Oregon

This may be useful in moments of despair and hopelessness, when the group is unable to move. Perhaps what is needed at these times is to go in, rather than out. Another way of doing this during a group process is take time out to do a “blank access” exercise.

This involves each person noticing something in the room, which “flirts” with them, then “shapeshifting” or becoming it in our imagination, in order to discover what its essence is. A question that may help us get there might be: “what quality do you experience when you step into the world of that thing?” Then finally returning to the group process and relating from that new place of awareness. This can create a powerful shift in a stuck group. But whatever way we choose to do it, it can be useful to shift out of what we’re primarily identifying with in the moment in order to move beyond an entrenched polarity.

Often we need help to do this. In the words of music group, Arrested Development, “I’m everyday people!” If we’re everyday people then that includes being our irritating boss, our adorable child or to go even further to say we are George Bush, Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein and god forbid, John Howard! We all need to do the work it’s not just the work of our governments to resolve conflict, since they are everyday people like us. I’d be thrilled, however, if John Howard did his sentient work. If Howard worked on his inner refugee or if George Bush worked on his inner Osama bin Laden and went deeper into his sentient experience around this there could possibly be a great shift in world politics. Equally, I believe that shifts are possible if an everyday person like myself explored these aspects of myself. Integrating these parts would mean going to the core essence of who they are and finding where they may be disavowed in my everyday living.

If we follow the theory, from the dreaming or sentience level, there is no real Osama bin Laden, no George Bush or John Howard. They are dream figures that exist everywhere in all of us. They are split off phantoms that are being lived out in the spirit of our times. I thought this idea was expressed well by a picture of bin Laden I came across in the local newspaper. Underneath his picture was a caption that read: *“IMPERVIOUS: Osama bin Laden can be killed, but not his ideas.”*²⁶ In that moment I felt a sense of him in my lounge room. Osama was a role of our times and something that is accessible in each of us.

This inner-outer process is a necessary part of our work if we are to live in this world together. I don’t necessarily see it as a special exercise, but more as a way of living. We need to live fully our own personal shamans and gurus. The teacher within, the elder, the wise person, the clever one, the one that sits in the fire, burns and is able to rise again through the ashes.

²⁶ The Sun Herald, 20/10/02 p 5

We can see it in others – our teachers and leaders and we can even hope they'll step in and save the day when things get too difficult, but ultimately we must live it for ourselves. This is the place of sustainable change.

Conclusion

In the evening after the group process on racism, I followed my impulse to approach the elderly woman who was the main target of attack on the side of the mainstream. I felt compassion towards her and admired her courage. I felt she really hung in there during something that was really tough. I wanted to know how she was and if it was her first time in a Worldwork group process.

She was from an Irish background and I imagined she must have quite a few of her own oppression stories in her history. She seemed touched by my approach and her response was great. She said she was a little tired but was OK. She'd taken the advice from the oppressed side and had gone away and done some inner work around her oppressiveness and her own oppression. Woah! I felt glad for making the contact.

Perhaps historically for the West, our first polarisation was between Adam and Eve and the whole paradise lost number. This and all our creation myths are shared dreams about our origins, hopes and fears. If we speak to our ancestors, as Mindell has suggested, perhaps we should also speak to these, our first parents in the mythical ancestral line? These early myths and dreams can have a unifying effect on diverse world experiences. They are a possible way of making human connection. Can we find our Eden again? Can we love all the parts of each individual—our humanity? Can a group recreate itself momentarily through sentient work and find peace and freedom, an Eden, in the midst of a hellish intractable conflict? Perhaps our Eden is the way of the “dreammaker” or the “Big You”. Mindell writes, “If love means openness to whatever is happening, then the Big You is unconditional love.” (Mindell 2001, p.134) The characters we see and deal with in our workplace, community, conferences and forums are part of our inner community.

Process work has always taught the importance of integrating psychology and social activism in group work. Bringing in the sentient level can create a unifying force that touches something mystical—it is the spirit, the numinous, evanescence and love. This force carries us to a place beyond interpretation and interventions, skills and strategies. ChuangTzu said, “The ‘this’ is also ‘that’. The ‘that’ is also ‘this’... That the ‘that’ and the ‘this’ cease to be opposites is the very essence of Tao.” (cited in Capra 1992, 125)

Case Two: Tertiary Education Institution

This case describes the limitations of doing direct conflict resolution work within a mainstream institutional setting. Particularly as a participant worker and not as an identified facilitator. In this context, differences in the values and agendas of the organisational culture, structural rank and a low capacity for tension made entering into personal dialogue a near impossibility. On a personal level, it also tapped into my own history of woundedness and suffering in institutions. This made it very difficult at times to engage with detachment and lucidity.

Under these circumstances, a crucial part of working on my workplace conflict and tension was to do my inner work. I will discuss the use of sentient tools for inner work as a way to potentially relieve unworkable workplace conflicts. I want to acknowledge that organisational culture can also have a hypnotic effect in that we can feel and believe this is the only reality, to which we may feel powerless. We can lose consciousness of other realities, dimensions and ways of relating, including our own sense of what's real or true for us. This is understandable considering many of us have spent large chunks of our childhood and adult lives in institutions.

Introduction

This case looks at a conflict between my immediate supervisor and myself. I believe she more closely represented some of the values and practices of the cultural consensus of the institution. My communication style, which tended to be more personal, direct and informal was more marginalised in that culture. From my supervisor's perspective, I was seen as uncooperative, and as not fitting into following her lead. I was accused of not being a "team player" and of being unprofessional. From my perspective, I experienced her management style as erratic and overly authoritarian and felt oppressed by the way she oversaw my work. I felt bullied at times and suffered a great deal from anxiety and stress. In hindsight, I can appreciate that she was also probably struggling with how to be as my boss. The conflict between us appeared in areas of joint decision-making, prioritisation of work, boundaries and role expectations. After restructuring in our unit, my position was upgraded. This made our roles very similar structurally. Both required a great deal of autonomy and independent project management, so that on an organisational level it was difficult to clearly delineate the boundaries between our roles.

As an intelligent and proactive Aboriginal woman, I saw my supervisor as a social activist. Due to restructuring in our unit her role changed from colleague and friend to my supervisor. When tensions rose between us, I held a high hope that with our awareness and belief in social justice issues we would be able to sort out our differences and perhaps even get closer. In our work together in the equity and diversity unit we had represented more marginalised groups within the institution. We had also worked together in supporting staff who had grievances regarding harassment and discrimination in their work units. How naïve I was. In the words of Carlos Castaneda²⁷, she was my “petty tyrant”. On a polarity level, I experienced her as a tough and confronting oppressor that I needed to stand up to. She was a familiar figure in my personal experience with authority in public institutions, but not quite as strongly. Perhaps I was really meant to get, once and for all, whatever the learning in this was for me.

When I worked on our polarisation as an innerwork she represented a marginalised aspect of myself that challenged me to own my power. I had an intrapsychic dialogue with her and at one point, I found that we sounded very alike. I followed the mood of how I experienced her, which started off as quite rigid and tough. When I went deeper to it’s core the polarities dropped away, and what remained was power. My boss was a very powerful woman. We were both powerful creative women, meeting each other. My major error was to directly engage with her over our polarisation since this did not take into account her structural rank – (yet on the other hand, you could say that this created the necessary escalation that helped me pick up awareness around my own power). I did not take into account her identification with the institution’s indirect and formal style. I was more attached to a high hope around our relationship which stopped me from seeing the signals against this. I was talking to her like a colleague, but she wasn’t. She was my boss and spoke from a position she believed was appropriate for her role. It was sobering for me to be aware of this. She made it very clear to me she did not want to engage in any discussion or negotiation; she was not interested in any awareness around her management. Her bottom line was that I basically “shut up” and accept (and/or obey) her style. For my part, I did not recognise the personal and psychological power I had through my capacity to be direct, hold tension and articulate my feelings more easily. I was caught up in my own complex and didn’t see that this was very intimidating for my supervisor and that it escalated and further polarised our differences.

²⁷ Castaneda wrote several books on his apprenticeship to the Yacqui Indian shaman, Don Juan

Some of the roles and ghost roles that were part of our dynamic included:

- I'm the boss VS This is a fair and equitable unit, always open to negotiation
- Oppressor VS Oppressed
- Powerful and in control VS Powerless
- Social activist VS Autocrat
- Personal VS Impersonal
- Representing the system VS Outside or against the system

Doing My Sentient Work

I worked on this conflict with my process work teachers, as it was taking a lot of my emotional space and energy and increasingly more people were entering into the conflict. I had at one point included my union representative, as I felt very isolated. I was told that I was required to keep the conflict a secret, whilst my supervisor met with our unit director regularly for support, who in turn included her direct boss, our Deputy Vice Chancellor. My supervisor also included her union representative.

During a mediation session, our unit director made copious notes on strategies, agreements and practices, but the deeper feelings never got unfolded. The structural power differences far outweighed any capacity for negotiation. When I did my inner work and became my supervisor, I contacted a tough, immovable part that said, "Listen kiddo, don't mess with me. It's my way or the highway!" My outer boss and my inner one were both powerful beings that were rivals, but momentarily in my sentient work they were one and the same. From this place, I could appreciate my supervisor as simply awesome. She really had moved far from very tough life circumstances. She still had "wood to burn" around her oppression story, which made her incredibly tough and inflexible to work for. But I also had my wood to burn around accepting authority and serving. Working on this on a polarity level was tricky because we had parallel processes with similar edges. We were the same in many ways in that going down was yet another loss of face and would feel like death. From a place of sentient awareness that is exactly what I needed to do. Allow that part of me that colonised me, oppressed me and squashed my power to die.

Working on this conflict internally helped alleviate some of the anxiety and “stuckness” around the outer conflict. It was a relief to come to a place in myself that recognised that to stand for my power would mean that I’d need to resign. My resignation felt like the next step in picking up my power and following my inner boss. It helped me recognise my need to pursue more creative, satisfying and autonomous work. My resignation was an act of “freedom to”, a step that made me aware that I had gone as far I could go, without perpetuating further suffering.

Conclusion

I recognise the story of how Don Juan²⁸ met his benefactor in my story of struggle with my supervisor. Don Juan had been beaten badly and left to die by a brutal boss. His benefactor found him on the road, nursed him back to health and sent him right back to work with the same boss because he told him it was his fate to integrate the teachings of the benefactor.

Don Juan needed to go back for the learning contained in that relationship dynamic in order to be finally free of it. His benefactor saw in the brutal employer a petty tyrant, and felt that it would be useful for Don Juan to learn how to interact with him and to “beat him” by not losing his composure and centre. Going back meant “burning his wood”. Carlos Castaneda explains that Don Juan was a fiery tempered young man full of rage over his situation as an Indian.

His benefactor wanted him to detach from that identification with his oppression, because only by identifying as a warrior, or Man of Knowledge, and not as an Indian, Mexican, or whatever, would he find the inner balance and personal power to overcome his brutal master. You could say that by working on the sentient level we are in some ways working on our fate.

Interestingly, my supervisor resigned shortly after I did. I believe she finally followed her dream of going back to a small country town and doing grassroots work with Aboriginal communities. My sentient work on power helped me to appreciate my supervisor as my inner ally. You could say she placed a key role in helping me finally leave the institution and pursue my own independent and creative pursuits.

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²⁸ Castaneda (1989)

Case Three: Personal Relationship Conflict

This case describes a personal relationship conflict I had with a friend regarding underlying differences in beliefs and expectations around age, gender and relationship. I believe our conflict reflected broader societal pressures around conventional norms concerning relationships. I will outline how I worked with the challenges of this conflict interpersonally and through sentient awareness. What follows is my own personal account of what occurred between my friend and I. I will endeavour to represent this with sensitivity and consideration, knowing that there may be differences in our perspectives.

Introduction

I recently had a conflict with a friend over a criticism on my singleness. “What are you doing wrong?” was the general sentiment from her side and had been so regarding past boyfriends. In our disagreement it seemed to me that she wanted to point out the “personality flaws” that restrained me from being in a relationship. Whilst I believe my friend when she said this was with good intent, the impact on me was one of hopelessness, hurt and defensiveness. Over the years that we’ve known each other my friend had followed a more conventional path, which included a long term marriage and children. After separating from her husband, she had several relationships which tended to eclipse each other, whilst I had shorter relationships and longer gaps in between them. My life was less conventional in that I’d been more or less single, travelled a lot and pursued my own personal development. My friend’s criticisms tended to reflect consensus reality expectations around women marrying, settling down and having children. Apart from anything else it is a heterocentric assumption that as a woman that is what I’m expected to want. I’ve invariably been in social situations where I’ve been questioned around my relationship status. At times this has felt like an assessment of my personal and moral character. Whilst my friend wasn’t necessarily saying this directly, our conflict tapped into a raw nerve around these societal expectations.

Going back to the conflict with my friend, our conflict arose out of my feeling patronised by her disapproval around the ending of a recent relationship. This was followed by advice around keeping a relationship. This sort of conversation had come up previously between us, and as mentioned earlier, whilst her intentions were good, the impact was hurtful. The message I heard in our conflict was; *‘the reason you’re not in a relationship is because you’re a loser and don’t know how to get it right. So I’m going to show you how to do it.’*

I wrote her an email which spoke of my hurt. I, in turn, accused her of being a serial monogamist and asked her to look at her own relationship history. Pretty soon our conflict escalated and recycled as we got stuck in one-sidedness around our hurt. I was still very polarised around my belief that my friend thought she was better than me because she was in a relationship. We eventually did come to a place of apology with one another but I felt the mood of hurt was still there at the end of our conversation.

Doing My Sentient Work

My “stuckness” gave me an indication that I perhaps I hadn’t gone deep enough in my inner work around our polarisation. I needed to get to the core of what triggered me so much about our conflict. I realised that I wanted my friend to take up a position of understanding and support that I wasn’t necessarily embracing myself. Her criticisms echoed a deeper, long-term, internal criticism that agreed with her and took it up a notch. My inner critic would say: “Yes, you’re such a “loser!” It’s true, you’re no good with relationships, you can’t keep them because you’re too proud and headstrong. You need to be more humble, etc.” Even to write this now is difficult, it touches a wounded part of me that has always felt ‘one down’. It brings up past hurts and humiliations around relationship. I feel vulnerable and exposed because these inner criticisms are frequently reinforced by consensus reality’s critical, put downy representations of older, single women. As I type away, all my body symptoms begin to arise—indigestion, anxiety and heat rashes on my arms. I don’t want to be seen as a “loser”! I hate this “loser.” It’s ageist, lookist and sexist. I feel like I’ve been fighting against it for such a long time.

I feel so many woman and men suffer from deep relationship wounds and loneliness, concerning inner and outer criticisms around not fitting into a societal norm around relationship. Equally, others suffer and are lonely from staying too long in unsatisfying and painful relationships for fear of being out of one, out of the norm. Who is this “Norm” anyway? At times I’d really like to shoot that irresponsible bastard!

To truly have freedom around identifying as a “loser” in relationships meant getting to know its gifts and powers and explore it from a sentient level, rather than from my everyday identity. In my inner work I asked myself, “What is the essential quality of the “loser”?” Simply asking this question changed my internal attitude from criticism to one of curiosity and interest. When I went inside and focused on the deepest qualities of this part of myself, I started to smile.

When I followed my movement tendencies I started to stick out my tongue, pant and do a floppy dance around the room, occasionally bumping into things! I was in a different mood and couldn't be down anymore, I just kept smiling, I felt irrepressible. When I followed this internally, the figure that went with my movement tendencies and mood was a non-conventional scallywag who liked to beat her own drum and not be caught up with societal norms. She reminded me of the Fool in the Tarot pack, an adventurer and lover of life, who bumped along at times. A true Taoist! In the sentient level, you know you've reached this place when the polarities drop away and you come to something deeper in yourself that is beyond judgment.

Looking back from this position at the conflict, it no longer held an emotional charge. There was now no conflict, just a deep appreciation of the inner meanderings of the Fool. Doing this sentient work created relief from the constant pressures of either being single or being in relationship. Both were true about me; I'm a single woman who is also in a myriad of relationships of varying degrees of depth and closeness. The deeper issue for me was to follow my awareness process in discovering my true nature. This required stepping outside of a reality based on societal norms or expectations and into a more sentient reality. When I'm in this place I find ultimate happiness. I know this part of me a little better now and feel more love and compassion towards my "loser".

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Loving Our Loser

On a sentient level, trying to overcome our "loser", never works because we cannot dispose of or overcome our weaknesses. To attempt to do this means always desperately trying to avoid our weak spots, which makes us vulnerable to our opponents and to ourselves. The "freedom to" in sentient work is to embrace and love the loser aspects of our own inner diversity. To be able to call out from the mountaintops in the truly loveable, loser style of Maxwell Smart²⁹, "Yes! I'm a loser and I'm loving it!!" There is a relieving sense of detachment to be able to say, "OK, I may not be the best catch, but I'm still a good catch!" To stay only in the polarity level is like a hypnosis or drug—the adrenaline of the fight, the high of asserting our chosen identity. This is part of the process, since it helps strengthen our capacity to engage with difference interpersonally. But, perhaps this is a gateway to accessing a deeper chamber in ourselves. Sentience helps deepen our inner experience of identity and develop our experience of diversity.

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²⁹ Maxwell Smart is a bumbling secret agent from a U.S. sitcom called "Get Smart". Despite his bumbings he somehow catches the baddies and gets to marry his gorgeous partner agent 99

CONCLUSION: PUTTING A LION IN YOUR HEART

What's the message here? We don't have to be super enlightened beings who are attuned to the slightest atmospheric nuances of the universe and then are able to translate them into lived experience. We are just everyday people who can practice listening to the lion's roars, gurgles and purrs. These may be in the form of noticing a light beam that suddenly catches the corner of our eye in the middle of a conflict, seeing an image in the pattern on the curtain during a work meeting and allowing ourselves to follow these experiences with curious intent. This is a way of entering into dreaming reality. But then again there may be moments where we truly are super enlightened beings?? It takes the courage and good humour of our lion's heart to recognise that the someone or something that disturbs us is part of us. Our lion's heart beats the strongest when we are in difficult group or world scenes where working on a conflict directly may not be always possible. Then we must go inside ourselves and listen to the lion's roar and tickle it under its chin and dance with our own inner awareness with curiosity and patience.

It takes a lion's heart to sit with tension and uncertainty, and to keep going when we don't understand the other side. It takes courage to keep going until we find the place of understanding. This is the realm of sentience in all its many names: the "dreaming"; the Tao; Wu Wei; Shakti; the Nagual. Like Kali, we are in a constant cycle of devouring aspects of our personal history and giving birth to new parts of our inner diversity.

Whilst politics and social activism gives us an analysis and a language that empowers us to proactively represent marginalised parts of ourselves and our communities, sentient work provides access to the deeper inner experiences that make human connection possible. The start of this, I believe, is to develop a deeper connection to our own humanity and our own inner diversity. Groups who identify as being mainstream or marginalised minority both need to look at their own oppressiveness as a key to exploring their oppression and vice versa. When the British moved out of India, Ghandi said that it was not enough for them to go. It was equally important to address where the British existed within each of them and in their social systems, such as the caste system.

Power is not only negative, repressing what it seeks to control. It is also productive.

It "traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse." (Hall 1997, p.51) The acapella group, "Sweet Honey in the Rock", have a wonderful song which started with, "We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes."

The writer and social activist, Fran Peavey, changed these lyrics slightly at a conference to sing, “We who believe in freedom must rest now and then.” I believe that sentience provides a place of respite and sustenance within the tense and uncertain process of interpersonal and group conflict work.

In conclusion, here are the key messages I have hopefully highlighted in this paper:

- Are you married to your identity? If so, this could create a major sticking point in conflict. Rather than getting stuck, why not create an inner dance between who you think you are and who you think you are not with who you could be? You could really have a party in there!
- Don’t get hopeless. If you do get hopeless – get to know this hopelessness from its deepest essence. This is the path to loving it. The things that we least love about ourselves, that bother us the most. They could be described as inner parts wanting to “flirt” with us and engage our attention until they are loved.
- Get to know your “loser”. Draw a picture of him or her. Walk her walk, blow him a kiss and watch out for signs of an inner critic.
- Notice when it’s time to withdraw from an outer conflict and do inner sentient work.
- Practice “flirting” everyday with everything: noticing what flirts with you and have fun becoming the “other”.

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