

THE SEARCH FOR EXPANDED CONSCIOUSNESS With the person-centered approach

The last paper I wrote (Natiello, 2003), addressed a pending, global paradigm shift, and opened with the following quote:

We are in the midst of an amazing global event that is centuries in the making: the awakening of the global mind, the emergence of a higher form of life in human evolution. (Ashok Gangadean, 2001)

I alluded to the kinds of persons who might usher us through such a shift, and said that genuine dialogue was an essential component of that movement. In this paper, I am suggesting to person-centered practitioners that we have the knowledge, research and understanding to contribute significantly to the ‘awakening of the global mind’, and that many of us have already joined the ranks of scientists and social pioneers who are fostering the development of expanded consciousness

I will rely mostly on anecdotal evidence to illuminate the process of expanding consciousness, because, ironically, residing too much in one’s theoretical head tends to inhibit that very possibility.

A professor who wanted to know about Zen visited a master who
Poured tea for his guest, but kept pouring until the visitor cried, “Stop!
Stop!” It is running over!
Indeed, said the master, like yourself!”
As long as you are brimming over with opinions and theories
There is no way to show Zen to you. (Franck, F. 1976).

My History with person-centered groups

I attended my first person-centered group in the Adirondack Mountains in 1977. That group was facilitated by Carl Rogers and a staff that included Natalie Rogers, originator of experiments with large groups using the tenets of the person-centered approach. There were over one hundred participants who came from various places in the world as well as the U.S. We met for sixteen days in the Adirondack Mountains at the former Vanderbilt Camping estate that housed the *National Center for Humanistic Education*.

It was an astounding, chaotic, and unsettling meeting that yielded events that many of us called ‘miraculous’. I was genuinely transformed by the experience, yet found it difficult to describe to curious friends and family. The following year, and for a number of years after that, I became a staff member, with Carl Rogers and other facilitators, of large groups that drew participants primarily from the East coast of the United States. Each group was remarkable in its own right, but, again, participants found it difficult to explain what made these meetings so life-changing. Most of them indicated that they had “learned more than I’ve learned in my whole life.” Still, they had difficulty expressing their learnings and understanding why their experience was so powerful. I was puzzled to hear continuing reports of *mystery* and *magic* rather than any logical explanation for the transformative quality of these groups.

The Indepth Learning Program in the person-centered approach. In 1980, two person-centered colleagues and I, in conversation with Carl Rogers, developed a process where serious students of the person-centered approach could gather to experience and reflect on its theory and practice. We were careful to remain true to the tenets of the

approach: 1) We stated the *purpose* of the project and provided learning resources, but, beyond scheduling dates for ten weekends during each year, we did not guide/direct the meetings or establish the curriculum; 2) We entered the program as much as possible, as co-learners rather than experts or ‘teachers’; 3) We established a climate that was pervaded by the three conditions (congruence, empathy, and unconditional positive regard); 4) we trusted the actualizing tendency of the group as a whole, and every individual in it, to find our way into deepened understanding of person-centered theory and practice. In other word, we were committed to the consistency between the theory of the approach and our community learning process.

The results were amazing—chaotic sometimes, but transformative. We saw many things that baffled and delighted us. For example, our staff met a day before each weekend to clear out any issues or unresolved feelings between us or in our lived experience outside. Consistently, those same personal/interpersonal issues surfaced later in the community among learners. It was almost as though they had attended our staff meetings, so eerily were they picking up our ideas, language and feelings. Sometimes, as a group, we reached a state of astounding cohesion and unity. We referred to those periods of cohesion as ‘moving into our group mind’. That state-of-being would hold up until some crisis erupted to fragment it. Once we had dealt with the crisis with openness and courage, the group would move to a higher level of functioning. Again and again, these exhilarating times would reoccur, in which people would speak for one another, have simultaneous insights, reach profound depths of empathy. Our decisions would become increasingly creative and even brilliant, replacing the conflict and power struggles that characterized the decision-making process in early stages of the group.

There were often paranormal experiences which all members shared, but none could explain.

During the second year, I did a qualitative study of the program to see if I could discover more about the power, intensity, and collective intelligence that occur in these groups. I conducted non-directed, indepth interviews at the beginning and the end of the year-long program with twelve learners chosen for diversity in age, educational background, and professional experience—psychologists, educators, retirees, medical professionals, homemakers. The interviews went on for several hours, and I began each one by asking “Can you describe the nature of learning/knowing that has occurred here for you?”

There were two kinds of learning that participants described. The first and most intense, I call *tacit, wholistic, pre-reflective* or, *organismic learning/knowing*. Recurrent themes about this learning/knowing emerged consistently from interviewees: 1) it arrived when the learner was relaxed and in a receptive state; 2) it was self-appropriated; 3) it involved the whole person with intellect, emotions, physiological shifts; 4) it was concerned with deep, pervasive, personal meaning rather than facts, concepts or information; 5) it strongly affected behavior, values, attitudes, and the self-esteem of the learner; 6) it involved an actual change in consciousness and subsequent behavior.

Learners had great difficulty in articulating these learnings. They said things like “*I could paint it but don’t know how to talk about it.*” “*I have no words that can communicate what I know.*” “*See that beautiful butterfly? That expresses what it was more than anything I can say.*” They consistently pointed to the climate and the absence of authority, the deep, non-interruptive quality of listening, the safety and trust within the

group, the willingness to stay with conflict until it was resolved as the important characteristics that facilitated this kind of learning. They expressed disappointment sometimes that there wasn't more rational, intellectual learning in the program that they could articulate and express, but the tacit learning was a source of intense exhilaration and considerable personal change for each interviewee.

It is this tacit knowing and its powerful creativity that is now being recognized in many arenas as evidence of the expansion of consciousness, creative consciousness, collective intelligence or group mind.

Sedona Large Group. In 1998 six experienced person-centered practitioners convened a large international group in Sedona with the stated purpose of reflecting on and understanding the phenomena that characterizes the person-centered groups we had all experienced. There were approximately 60 participants from around the world, and no designated facilitators.

I did not learn anything new there, but the recurring phenomena that characterized these meetings led me to search the literature of systems, chaos and complexity theory to see if I could bring some order and understanding to the person-centered group experience. Those theories, I believe, lend coherence and meaning to some of the mysterious occurrence of collective intelligence and group mind that often characterize the person-centered process.

Systems and Chaos Theories

Okay, here comes a crumb about those theories, encapsulated into an impossibly small, inadequate explanation. If it doesn't make sense, just skip over it. Getting too immersed in your intellect will fragment your wholeness, and inhibit the flow of

consciousness we are discussing anyway. I am just putting something here so that you will not be tempted to discount the entire discussion. It is easy to find more information in the books, articles and websites at the end of the paper.

Pioneers in systems, quantum, and chaos theories have an entirely different world view than the Cartesian or Newtonian model on which many of us model our lives. They believe that all life and all change is composed of oscillating energy rather than the shifting or reordering of separate components or building blocks. If such a world view is correct, it makes sense that when the usual barriers (authoritarianism, objectivity, rules of behavior, ‘me-ness and you-ness’, etc.) that our society has relied on to curtail (control) chaos and disorder, energy will heat up and intensify. It is in the accelerated exchanges of energy (Illyia Prigogine calls them perturbations) that living systems can eventually explode and transform into a higher order. Change, according to this world-view, is not a linear process but rather depends on the *dynamic stability* of energy; living systems derive their essential properties from the exchange of energy within and between all systems rather than from the properties of their parts. Wholes are greater than the sum of the parts, and the ‘wholes’ bear little resemblance to the parts. (For example, in describing an important happening in a person-centered group, describing the behavior of individuals involved throws no light at all on the identity of the whole group at the outcome of that event. Something more than the participation of each individual is happening all the time—something that is difficult to identify by dissecting the process).

The environment, say these theorists, is critical to the sustenance and development of the group. It, too, is a living system within and around which energy is constantly exchanged. Thus, the crucial role played by climate (to which person-centered facilitators

pay meticulous attention). Self-transcendence is the tendency of living organisms to reach out beyond their present state. In interaction with the environment and other energy systems, such a tendency creates new structures and patterns of behavior. The human mind is an essential component of the dynamic of self-organization and transformation...a living subsystem in its own right. Awareness is one of its properties, and this property is called consciousness. Many agree that consciousness is the emerging focus of human evolution during this period of history (Natiello, 2000, pgs. 134-136, Rogers, 1980, pp. 203-204).

The study of systems, quantum and chaos theories lends credibility to the expanded sense of consciousness that seems to mark person-centered (and other) groups. In these groups, I believe, with the integrity of the climate preserved, “defenses fall away, openness, fluidity, interrelatedness, and, thus oscillations within each subsystem and the larger whole increase. Persons touch depths they have never approached before. They become less inhibited, more fully-functioning and interconnected. Their behavior is increasingly spontaneous and creative. Unity, connectedness, and a sense of oneness are enhanced” (Natiello, 2000, p. 137). And, of course, with the familiar boundaries erased and development of shared consciousness, the issues of staff *would* become common property; the whole (the group) *would* become greater than the sum of its parts (the individuals); the intensity of energy *would* increase and, thus, *lead* to unpredictable changes in the system. “Aha,” I say to myself while engaging in this search, “things are beginning to make some sense at last (although I still do not claim to know the ‘truth’!).

Now I was hooked on continuing the process of discovery. Part of that search was to reread Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, David Bohm, Krishnamurti, Rudolf Steiner, Carl

Rogers, and the current researchers of consciousness some of whom are Juanita Brown, Otto Scharmer, Tom Callanan, Rupert Sheldrake, and others. In the work of these pioneers are many insights into the phenomena of person-centered groups.

Although the appearance of collective wisdom/expanded consciousness that we are finding in the person-centered groups seems to resist explanation in rational, logical terms, indeed, it *does* exist. It was the reputation of the famous scientist, David Bohm that gave credibility during the 1980s to the study of thought and consciousness and their connection to new models of reality being posed by modern physics. By ‘thought’ Bohm meant not only the products of our conscious intellect but also our feelings, emotions, intentions and desires (Cayer, 1997, p. 43). His well known conversations with the Indian mystic, Krishnamurti, revealed a potential for a new kind of conversation that could conceivably transform “not only the relationship between people, but even more, the very nature of consciousness.....” Bohm called these conversations, ‘dialogues’. (Hamilton, 2004). He understood that most of the problems between human beings arose from the unexamined, memory-laden cultural presuppositions and ideas that we carry into our discourse, and that prevent us from having meaning-filled exchanges on matters of importance. If we could drop pre-conceived ideas and learnings, said Bohm, and get unstuck from our intellect and memory, we could participate in a ‘pool of common meaning’ where change and growth is far more likely to happen.

Even before David Bohm’s arrival on the consciousness scene, and, during the last two decades especially, the acknowledgement of collective wisdom has proliferated. Here are some examples of what people are beginning to accept:

*Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said, “We aremoving towards some new critical point that lies ahead – a harmonized collectivity of consciousness equivalent to a sort of super-consciousness.....the Omega Point”

*Otto Scharmer (head of an MIT Leadership project). “What’s new today in the world is that now the first and most accessible gateway into deeper spiritual experience is not individual meditation but group work. What happens is that you tap into this deeper process of awareness and consciousness as a group.”

*“I think it comes down to *Grace*,” Juanita Brown explains. “You can set the conditions that make it more likely for that ‘*magic in the middle*’ to happen, but you can’t predict that it will happen.....”

*Tom Callanan, project officer from Fetzer Institute, says, “Good conversation doesn’t just involve getting the best people in a room and saying, ‘Let’s talk.’” Occasionally, an unexpected intimacy and vulnerability would emerge between the participants. But often the groups struggled to find cohesion. At times, something *magical* would occur.

*The Fetzer Institute initiated a project to look for ways to increase the effectiveness of their dialogues and deepen understanding of this group wisdom. One of their questions was, “What was the experience of ‘*magic*’ that emerged when the groups they studied were at their best.”

“What was the *mysterious’ intelligence* that seemed to emerge when these groups reached the unity of group mind?”

*Rupert Sheldrake and his theory of morphic fields where one treats the whole flock of geese as if its in a field, the field of the whole group. A morphic field

organizes systems where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Once created, collective fields impact on other groups engaged in the same activity and all break through to new knowledge or capacities. (These citations in Hamilton, 2004).

The italics in this section are mine. I highlighted them because it was a relief to see that these scientists, philosophers and sociologists use words like *magic*, *mysterious*, and *grace*. I believe that what makes the phenomenon of expanded consciousness so confusing and inarticulate, is that its explanation depends on a different world view than the one most of us hold. To understand it requires a “change of mind”, a new way of *seeing*. Enough of us know, however, that when people gather in groups, where certain conditions are facilitated, a kind of collective wisdom is generally predictable. That wisdom, collective intelligence, or group mind may be capable of birthing a new social or spiritual order of evolutionary proportions.

Facilitation of the Collective Wisdom

Although there is no final word on what collective wisdom is, there is plenty of agreement that it exists and is a powerful force for change. There is a good bit of consensus among the people working with and researching expanded consciousness/collective wisdom about how to facilitate it. The few instructions are simple but *very* challenging, with only slight disagreements about the minimal amount of structure to impose. The instructions are strikingly similar to the conditions posed by Carl Rogers as enhancing healthy human development.

Bohm suggests beginning a group with 20 or more people. My 30- plus years of experience in groups teaches me that the group can be smaller and still achieve

breakthrough thinking. It can even occur in a dyad, as in the therapeutic relationship. Have the participants talk together—preferably with the intention of deepening their understanding of the meaning of the chosen focus. That can be “what would improve the moral significance of our work in the world,” to grappling with a global epidemic like AIDs, to understanding the deeper implications of person-centered theory. Invite group members to suspend their strongly held ideas and assume the state of ‘not knowing’; to listen carefully and closely to others, and speak as authentically as possible; to allow room for the wonderment of the unexpected to unfold. Make sure the group space is safe by respecting every person’s contribution; be as present, real, and vulnerable as possible. In such a climate, the unexamined assumptions that impede creative dialogue between all of us will reveal themselves and push the group into a higher collective intelligence. Participants who can reside in what Bohm calls ‘the pool of meaning’, and Rogers calls ‘the transparent spirit of oneness’, will almost inevitably move toward collective wisdom and a unified learning field where the whole will be greater than the sum of its parts. In this climate, individuals quickly forget about their personal agendas and competition. Their minds expand, group attention unites and collective wisdom is unleashed. In such a state, consciousness is elevated beyond the level of any individual, and the group is more able to address the vital issues of the global community.

Be aware that there are the common obstacles that can keep a group from reaching the state of expanded consciousness. Some of these obstacles are:

- 1) The pressure to conform to the norm. Anxiety about “What is expected” often inhibits participants from being open, free and courageous.

- 2) The confusion and frustration that arise from the imperative that facilitators not set the norms, or guide or direct the process.
- 3) The fear of being judged, resented, mocked, or excluded from the group.
- 4) Jockeying for position, status and power. These groups must be non-hierarchical, and, for participants used to authoritarian systems, it can be tempting to try to exercise control, gain status, become the most visible.

The conflicts from the above obstacles that often arise in the preliminary stages of the group *must* be tolerated and addressed. Genuine conflict actually contributes to the oscillation of energy which, according to systems and quantum thinkers, is crucial for bringing about change. It is important to resolve conflicts openly, and not be afraid of them. It requires courage, determination, and empathy to facilitate the extraordinary potential of expanded consciousness. We *do* know how to bring it about. To tighten your resolve, remember what Mae Wan Ho, PhD, reader of biology at the Open University in the United Kingdom says:

Invisible quantum waves are spreading out from each of us and permeating into all other organisms...each of us has the waves of every other organism entangled within our own makeup.... We are participants in the creation drama that is constantly unfolding. We are constantly co-creating and re-creating ourselves and other organisms in the universe, shaping our common futures, making dreams come true, and realizing our potentials and ideals (In Hamilton, 2004).

Partial Reference List for Expanded Consciousness

Peggy Natiello, Ph.D.

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SELECTED ORGANIZATIONS & CREATIVE INTELLIGENCE TOOLS

The Co-Intelligence Institute. <http://www.co-intelligence.org>

The World Café. <http://www.theworldcafe.com>

The Society of Organizational Learning. <http://www.solonline.org>

The Dialogue Group. <http://www.thedialoguegrouponline.com>

Collective Wisdom Institute. <http://www.collectivewisdominitiative.org>