

## Can We Talk Our Way Back To Sanity?

About half a year ago California State Representative John Vasconcellos started to do some thinking about what he called a humanistic approach to politics. This was a rather vague but ambitious hope that the human elements of individual needs, opinions, desires could somehow be organized to play an important role in political matters. For some months he went around the state meeting with little groups of people to stir up interest in this approach. In June of this year an organizational meeting was held in Berkeley attended by some 40 people most of whom had had some experience with the encounter movement and human potential movement. The general level of enthusiasm seemed high and yet there was a widespread sense of uneasiness which seemed to say, "This idea feels exciting but just exactly what is it? How do we go about doing this?"

Now interestingly enough I had had a strikingly similar experience during the summer of 1974. Under the aegis of the San Francisco Gestalt Therapy Institute, of which I am a member, I had offered a seminar -- open to the public -- entitled "Explorations in Psycho-political Action". This was co-led by myself, a psychotherapist, and three colleagues, a sociologist, a historian and a ~~philosopher~~ philosopher.

I was frank to say in our brochure that the purpose of the seminar was to try to find out what the seminar was all about, i.e., what might psychopolitical action be? The main question I put to my fellow-seminarians was: Can the methods of the growth movement and humanistic psychology, i.e., open communication, attention to process, emphasis on one's personal growth, and in general trying to be as real as one knew how, can these methods be in some way integrated with reformist or radical politics?

For a good many weeks we also stumbled around sometimes having fun, sometimes perishing from boredom. Our experiences had some of the same frustrating qualities as the ones I experienced in the Vasconcellos group. There was the powerful, intuitive feeling that we were on the edge of something big but the thing felt slippery and we could get no satisfying handle on it.

A few weeks ago I got the the first bit of (hopefully) creative inspiration and I want to put it out and see whether anyone out there thinks that it could have the ghost of a chance. The idea is simply for people to get together to talk and get to know each other.

Where and how would the groups be formed? Everyone has neighbors of some sort. You get ten of your neighbors together for two hours every two weeks or so and just get more and more acquainted with each other. On the job, in office or factory, the same thing, just get together and learn a bout each other. In work situations, I would suggest two different kinds of group composition. One would be with people at your level, i.e., clerks meet with clerks, teachers meet with teachers. This might alternate with meetings across levels so that bank presidents and clerks and guards spend time getting acquainted.

What would be the purpose? Simply to attempt what I feel to be the heroic task of genuinely being with and communicating with each other.

How do you do this? What is the form? From the growth movement, the encounter movement and group therapy groups we already have considerable know-how about ~~how to do it~~ learning to be real with each other. Couldn't these not-so-difficult skills be quickly learned by great numbers of people if they were motivated to do so? With some practice, motivation and effort couldn't they learn to recognize each other's games, avoid the usual phoniness and hiding, take the risks of truly being with each other?

On the one hand the idea feels foolish, naive, simplistic, zany. And at the same time it seems to have a powerful appeal. A number of friends to whom I've mentioned it have commented on its revolutionary possibilities. What better way to deal with the well-nigh universal feeling of alienation in all of us than to truly meet with the people whose faces you see daily?

Another thought I had some years ago may serve to throw light on this approach. I came across a little squib on the front page of my local newspaper which described an intriguing tradition presumably followed by the Chinese Red Army. According to this tradition, every year for about a week all officers leave their posts and go back into the ranks as privates. They learn all over again to stand inspection, do KP and shine their rifles. During this week, they re-establish a kind of contact with the ordinary soldier which they have necessarily lost in their usual routines.

At the time I was working as a psychologist on the staff of a mental hospital. I thought: wouldn't it be exciting to try something like that on our hospital wards? Every two or three weeks for an 8-hour stint, all staff members from the Director on down should go back on the wards and do the actual work for which the hospital exists, i.e., spend time with the patients, bathe and feed them, play ping-pong with them, meet their relatives. Then you go back to your desk and phone and resume the shuffling of papers. But I suspect you'd go back with a different spirit. Patients and other staff members would exist for you in a more 3-dimensional way.

That is what I would hope would come from the talk method I've described here. I make the assumption that as you let yourself be known to others and let others be known to you that powerful humanizing forces are set in motion which can deeply affect peoples' thinking and action. ~~Perhaps~~ Perhaps, if we are willing to take the very great risk of learning plain <sup>and</sup> truthful talk, perhaps we can take a few steps forwards towards sanity.

I wonder whether any people out there will think this idea makes sense. I hope so because I think it makes alot of sense. The idea is that if many, many people get together in groups and learn to talk very openly and freely to each other that this very act can be a powerul and cleansing political force.