

Getting It Together

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I

A great deal of folk wisdom finds expression in the popularity of particular phrases. In the past few years, considerable psychological sophistication has been reflected in such terms as ego-trip, vibrations, energy, etc. "Getting it together" is a popular, hip expression referring, of course, to getting organized or prepared or settled. It has occurred to me that there is no more ambitious or penetrating formulation for the goals of psychotherapy than is suggested in the phrase "getting it together". The question is, what is "it"?

The notion of harmonizing, getting together various currents, vectors or layers of human personality is basic. The Freudians would harmonize id, ego and superego. Jungians aim to integrate, among other things, the male and female principle -- animus and anima. Perls points to the importance of uniting thought with feeling. When it comes to getting IT together, there are apparently many ways of regarding IT.

During the past several years, I have been doing some exploratory work with group techniques that seem to have a lot of relevance to the theme of bringing things together. Exactly what I have been exploring has not always been clear to me. In part I was following some hunches and in part I was intrigued by pure technique. More recently I am being led by a personal groping towards an understanding of age-old but elusive mystical concepts.

By way of background, I would like to describe a method which I was employing some four years ago. For many years I had had a great curiosity as to how well one could know another person "from the inside". I hit on a technique which seemed to take a step or two in this direction. I called it the "What It's Like To Be Me Game" and employed it in workshops and group therapy situations.

The group was divided into dyads and given the following instructions:

Find some place where you can speak in privacy. You will take turns being speaker and listener. The objective is for the speaker to convey to the listener -- in as comprehensive and exhaustive detail as possible -- what it was like to be you in your first ten minutes this morning. No detail is too insignificant; as long as it truly interests you, it will interest your listener. Be a journalist, making these first ten minutes come alive for your listener. For instance, did you awaken naturally or with an alarm clock? How did your body feel? Was it good to get out of bed or did you grumble? What was your reaction to the weather? As you looked at your face in the mirror, did you have particular reactions to each feature?

Obviously it is enormously difficult to be totally honest in giving this account. Do the best you can.

The listener is to be purely a listener. Ask questions only for clarification, and as infrequently as possible.

Take about fifteen or twenty minutes to describe these early minutes of your day. After you're finished, take your turn as listener.

After a half hour, when each member of the dyad had taken his turn, the group was asked to reconvene. Dyads were asked to sit together. I would then perform the following "ritual". (Let us say that a particular dyad consisted of Mary and Ann.)

I would say: "Each of you has now heard, in great detail, what your partner's first ten minutes were like this morning. But so far, you have listened while hearing it told. Now, Mary, (as I make appropriate gesture) I take your head and put it on Ann. Ann, I take your head and put it on Mary. Each of you imagine that you are the other and for the next ten or fifteen minutes, I want you to re-live the other's experience "from the inside" -- in whatever way you can understand these words. Here and there you might try to extrapolate, figuring,

'If she felt so-and-so, then she might also have felt thus-and-so, etc.' Now, each of you close your eyes and experience in fantasy what the other's first ten minutes felt like."

After this effort at fantasy experiencing, dyads were once again sent off to be by themselves. For this final step, the instructions were as follows:

"You have now made an effort to feel what it was like to 'be' your partner. Tell your partner what this felt like. When you're right, when you've got the feel of the person, your partner is to tell you so. When you're straying off the track and projecting your own trip, the partner is to point out, 'No, it wasn't like that; it was like -- .' In that way, you can probably get closer and closer to the feeling of being the other."

This constituted the entire technique. Of course, a great variety of things might be done with the feed back the groups would bring as to what it was like to play the game. But the game itself was invariably enlightening and fascinating to the participants, involving a level of detailed sharing and intimacy which was quite unique. Often enough, simply going through the steps of the game, even without the group discussion follow-up afterwards, generated quite powerful feelings.

II

In pursuing my interest in the problem of overcoming separateness, it occurred to me that I might employ my knowledge of hypnosis techniques. My present technique, after undergoing a number of variations, is as follows:*

* This paper is being written in early September. I will have an opportunity to demonstrate the method at the AAP Annual Institute at Berkeley in November 1973.

I have worked with groups ranging in size from 4 to 50. As a first step, I give the group some practice in a method of physical relaxation which I call the arm-dropping technique. This is a simple technique which involves holding the subject's arm by the wrist while he is encouraged to relax and "let the arm go". The arm is then moved about and then dropped and caught in the other hand. At first group members work with each other in groups of two, taking turns in doing the relaxing and then being the subject. Conversation is discouraged and a quiet mood is fostered. Most people learn the technique in a matter of minutes.

Then the same method is used, this time with groups of three. The subject is in the middle while two others are on each side simultaneously relaxing each arm. The ability to let both arms go and to allow the arms to be moved non-synchronously, i.e., in ways not related to each other involves considerable letting go and commonly develops a quick and deeply relaxed state which can later be employed as a step towards hypnoidal experiences. The entire group practices this for several minutes, each person having a turn in each position.

I then organize them into groups of four, sitting close to each other and in comfortable positions. Those who wish sit on the floor; others can sit in chairs.

Instructions then proceed as follows:

Quiet yourself by closing your eyes and going deeply into your own center. There is some place deep inside yourself which is solid and calm. Find it and enjoy being there quietly. Relax yourself with your breathing. The most effective moment at which to relax is on the exhalation. Tell yourself that whenever you breathe out, you relax deeply, letting all tensions go.

Now open your eyes and quietly regard in turn each of your three companions. Feel yourself contacting them from your own center to each of their centers. This can be markedly different from the way we commonly look at each other. Perhaps you are aware of their defenses, their fears. This is the superficial layer. Go past these to their own calm centers and feel them contacting your center. Each of your three companions in turn. Quietly, unhurriedly, without pushing.

When the mind is in a relaxed and concentrated state -- as now -- there are many interesting things we can do. One thing we can do is to roll back time. Sometimes, as you know, we can roll back time for months or years. At this moment, I want to roll back time for you just fifteen minutes or so to the arm-relaxation exercise we were doing together. Be back there. Remember what it was like to let someone else take your arm. Feel the fingers on your wrist. Use the principle of concrete detail: remember where you were sitting, who was on your left side and who was on your right. Feel the pleasure of your arm being moved and your letting go more and more. As we continue the relaxation will go through you more and more.

I would like you now to start -- slowly and easily -- whispering to yourself your own name and the names of each of your three companions. Whisper but be sure to move your lips. The four names over and over in a rhythmic soothing manner. And now start slowly to mix up the sequence of the names. Continue slowly to whisper but the sequence gets unpredictable. Can you start losing interest in whose name is whose name? Don't care whose name goes with whom. Can you just let the names start to merge?

Now join hands with the people on each side of you. Let your eyes be open or closed, whichever you like. Concentrate on the sensation in the hands that are holding your hands. Identify with the hands that are holding yours. Feel the world through those hands. What does the world feel like through those hands? Can you place yourself in those hands. How much of yourself can you place in those hands.

Now I would like you all to put your hands in the center of the group of four. Feel all the fingers; many fingers. It doesn't matter whose fingers are whose fingers. There are many fingers, many different feelings. Can the fingers be our fingers, forgetting which are your fingers?

Remember again the nice, heavy feelings in the arms. Take a couple of deep breaths and go still more deeply relaxed. Let the heaviness go up to the head and let your neck be so loose and delicate that it can't hold up such a heavy head. The heads are heavy and lean forward. **OUR HEADS ARE COMING TOGETHER.** Perhaps they touch, perhaps they don't; that doesn't matter. But our heads can come together with all the levels of meaning which you can find in that.

How much can you allow heads to come together? No need to force or push. Be aware of any fear you have and accept it; let it be. Can you go past the fear and let the heads and selves come together? Let it happen just as much as you can comfortably do so. Perhaps you are aware of not wanting to be together with a particular person in your group? Go past his superficial qualities into his center as you allow him or her to go past your surface layer into your center.

Check your physical position and see that you remain comfortable. Again, take a couple of deep breaths and be deeply relaxed.

And now I would like to put to you a question which has intrigued mankind through the ages, the question, "Who am I?"

Of course, there is the commonsense answer, "I am I, me, with my separateness, my boundaries, my qualities." But we know that there are also many other answers: "I contain you and vice versa. You contain me vice versa. I am we and we are I. I contain all of us and am contained in all of us. My self is bounded and also not bounded."

Just consider -- the fascination of that
the excitement of that
the fear of that
the comfort of that.

Can joys and sorrows be ours? Can strengths and weaknesses be our?

How much can you let go of your separateness? Can you let it go at this moment even for a little while? Remember, you can always choose to take it back, to have it again. YOU CAN ALWAYS CHOOSE TO TAKE IT BACK!

Perhaps you can feel your separateness as a small current in a larger stream. Each one is there, current and stream, and you can choose which one to feel at any moment. Each is necessary to the other. Each is necessary to the other. You can feel with a smooth, pulse-like shifting at one moment the I-ness and at another the merging togetherness. And remember, the duration of the moment is chosen and defined by you.

Imagine, now, that others can join your group of four. Imagine bringing in whomever you want.

.....Now bring in someone your're afraid of.
.....Now bring in someone you don't like.
.....Bring in any admired person of past or present.

Go back now to your breathing and enjoy the breathing. Feel a harmony of breathing within the group as if we are being breathed by one set of lungs, and the voice we hear is breathed and shared by us all.

I shall ask you to return shortly. How much of this experience will you want to take back and remember? How long do you want to remember it -- days, weeks, years?

In returning to the more familiar world, it is important that you do so at your very own tempo. Move gradually, become alert gradually, ignore everyone's tempo but your own.

(pause)

Please remain for a while with your small groups. Share with each other whatever of the experience you wish. If you feel words interfere, respect this feeling. When someone does talk, practice closing your eyes and feel those words come through you. Be that person. Of course, that can be practiced whether others speak or not.

III

The entire exercise takes less than an hour. I have found that at least 25% of participants have very strong experiences. Often there is a powerful hush among the group and a disinclination to speak. For myself, I am frequently struggling with a lump in my throat.

Some sample reactions:

I didn't want to return.
It was frightening to think of merging, but when I overcame the fear it was very beautiful.
I felt like a petal on a four-petalled flower.
I have found a solid place I can always return to.
I overcame my angry feelings towards (name).
I lost all track of time.
I feel great harmony.

We cannot find a more basic or perplexing question in personality theory than the question of identity. Any feeling of confusion or uncertainty about the question, "Who am I?" leads to such a jarring shock to the roots of one's being as to preclude the sense of minimum stability, continuity and coherence necessary to maintain meaning.

We know that uncertainty as to one's identity is not a simple all or none matter. There is the level of deep uncertainty which we call psychosis, manifested by readily observable dis-organization and distress. There is every possible degree of fleeting and momentary uncertainty which we all experience from time to time. One of the finest compliments we can bestow is to say about someone, "He knows who he is; he knows where he's at."

The phrase "where he's at" implies a place, a locus. The problem of localization of the self, "placing" it in some part of the body or in some role or pattern of skills has been studied by many social psychologists

from a developmental point of view. Children localize the self differently at different ages, gradually moving from mouth, stomach and legs to face and head.

It is obviously possible for adults to locate themselves too narrowly. In 1929, businessmen who had located the self too narrowly in their money-making capacities were hopping out of windows. The beautiful actress who identifies all too narrowly with her physical beauty suffers serious shock at signs of age.

It seems wise, therefore, to wonder where and how should the self be localized? Enormously persuasive answers are provided in the lives of the great sages and religious leaders who over and over again point to the possibility of transcending the seemingly untranscendable, one's separateness, one's individual identity. According to these thinkers, it is indeed possible for the self to be transformed into the Self.

What is this mystery? Does it have meaning? Does it make sense at all? Can it be a subject for empirical scientists to debate? For me it is a sign of hope for our times that such questions are more than ever on our scientific agenda.

In thinking about it, I turn to a set of observations which I believe to be of over-arching importance -- the unquestionable fact that some men have reached heights of integration which have enabled them to live a life both dynamic and serene. And many of these men -- as is told of Zen masters -- faced even the moment of death with utter calm and acceptance. What greater transcendence is possible? Of these men we would not be inclined to say: they were on ego-trips. Rather, they attained such breadth of identity-- with mankind, with life forces -- that we would rather say: they were on human trips.

All too often, this kind of thinking is reacted to -- consciously or unconsciously -- as a pitch for compulsory saintliness, a quality that is a phony bore. There does exist a deeply-centered sense of kinship with men and things which is un-phony and unforced and which flows as a natural expression. It is a quality neither sticky nor burdensome and confers freedom on both self and others. Some people make it.