

The Seventies was a decade when many women were thrust by personal and political events into changing themselves and their lives. Some of this change was precipitated by participation in consciousness-raising groups and political activities. Some women turned to professionals for help in bringing about and integrating these changes.

Over the decade there was a proliferation of techniques for undertaking the journey into self. Often this was bewildering for those trying to choose among psychoanalysis, client-centred therapy, transactional analysis, behaviour modification, bioenergetics, transcendental meditation, EST, rolfing, gestalt and encounter groups. Many of these growth systems, developed primarily by males and certainly by individuals steeped in patriarchal values, were a mixed blessing. Popping pills may well have numbed us or dulled our awareness but, used irresponsibly, these newer forms of therapy often plunged us into emotional intensity we could neither control nor comprehend. 'Humanistic' group leaders were no further along than psychiatrists in freeing themselves of their patriarchal mindset. As a result, they were sometimes helpful, sometimes damaging to the women who consulted them. This made the personal change process a slow, circuitous one with unexpected trapdoors and detours.

The task of feminist therapists is to draw upon the useful aspects of each of these systems. In part because I operate outside the constraints of any traditional institution, I am free to take risks both in bringing a feminist perspective to existing therapeutic forms and in experimenting with new ones. This article is a review of the evolution of my work as a feminist therapist during the Seventies and a glimpse into developments likely during the Eighties.

In 1972, while still employed by the counselling service at Simon Fraser University, I began to identify myself as a feminist and to do emotional self defence groups for women. I have elsewhere described these groups and some of the recurring themes that emerged.¹ Although the groups were popular and strong in impact, I became dissatisfied with them for a number of reasons. First, I wanted to find ways of speeding up the process. Second, I wanted to teach women more than just how to protect themselves from a hostile world. I wanted to help them discover ways of having an increased impact upon that world. Third, the initial groups were very

A Decade of Personal Change

SARAH JOY DAVID



L'auteur retrace le développement de son travail de thérapeute féministe durant les années 70 et prédit des changements personnels et politiques pour les années 80.

verbal and cognitive in orientation (reflecting the limits in my training and that of the vast majority of mental health practitioners in Canada). Intuitively, I knew that exploring at emotional, physical and spiritual, as well as intellectual, levels would deepen the work. Finally, the original format, once-weekly meetings

of two or three hours, for anywhere from six weeks to four months, was frustrating. Each week it took an hour or two to warm up. Then, just when the group was functioning at its best, it would end. In the intervening week, the energy built up in the preceding session would dissipate and have to be re-created.

In 1976 I changed the name of the groups I led to 'Women Emerging' to reflect a change in focus from self defence to self expression. I gradually introduced non-verbal techniques: breathing exercises, bioenergetics, relaxation, massage, body awareness work,² movement and art to balance the verbal, analytic work. At the same time I shifted to doing weekend groups and five-day workshops, where greater intensity can be built up and more accomplished.³

Twelve to sixteen women participate in a group. Some women enrol in these groups more than once. The first workshop often functions as an exposure to the process, laying the groundwork for greater comfort and risk-taking the second time around. However, some women work deeply from the start. Usually, before returning to work at deeper levels, participants spend three or four months integrating the changes already made. I find that four groups interspersed with a few individual sessions is sufficient to produce extensive and lasting change.

I begin the groups with a verbal description of the social and political factors that contribute to women's unhappiness, emotional turmoil and reduced effectiveness. The degree of sophistication of this cognitive roadmap of our psychological oppression varies with the state of consciousness of the participants. Its purpose is to provide a framework that will make sense of everything else that occurs. It is meant, at the same time, to validate women's experience of reality while undercutting inappropriate self-blame. Throughout the group, when particular pieces of self-exploration work trigger thoughts about the broader political context, I relate what is happening back to the initial feminist analysis.

A large portion of our time is spent doing emotional release work. This is the exorcism at emotional levels that complements the intellectual exorcism called for by Mary Daly.⁴ Most of us, while growing up, received and obeyed injunctions to contain or repress our pain, anger and even excitement. In order to do this we had to hold our breath, tighten our muscles or move some body part out of alignment. Unexpressed feelings do not

disappear. They remain stored in the body. Considerable energy must be exerted to continue holding them in. Energy tied up in this manner is unavailable for more creative use. In addition, such tension can, over time, damage our bodies. It is thus imperative that we release and reclaim blocked energy. This part of the work, which is the equivalent of an emotional enema, can be accomplished in a variety of ways.

Breathing and bioenergetic exercises are good for discharging feelings that are near the surface. Moreover, they can be used whenever needed outside the group. Massage and body work are better for more deeply-buried feelings. Guided body fantasy and gestalt work between body parts⁵ are also effective tools for enabling buried feelings to surface. The goal is to increase body awareness in order to facilitate expression of stored feelings. This can occur because of the close relationship between physical sensation and emotions. For example, a woman begins to notice tightness or pain in her neck or shoulder. The gentle manipulation of that area loosens it. Soon she bursts out sobbing or laughing, or expressing some other previously blocked feeling. The painful sensation was a signal that energy was concentrated in that spot. After the feelings are released the area feels looser; it hurts less and the person experiences increased space in the area worked upon. (This is especially true of work done on the throat, abdomen or chest.) For a variety of reasons the group format is particularly powerful in facilitating emotional discharge. Those whose feelings are most similar trigger one another. Those who need to receive support before feeling safe to release can obtain that from other group members.

In 1978 I felt a need to further speed and deepen the change process occurring in the groups. To this end I introduced meditation and group visualizations.⁶ The flow of psychic energy, much like the flow of physical energy, restores emotional flow. These techniques and the heightened spiritual awareness they brought about have, indeed, increased the effectiveness of the group process. Often the most powerful release occurs during group meditation. Some women feel more comfortable releasing together, when they need not be the centre of the group's attention. However, I believe there are other factors than can be explained by increased anonymity—opening at spiritual levels through meditation is the deepest, most connecting and therefore most releasing form of opening.

While discharging and healing old pain is an essential aspect of therapy, it must be viewed as a first rather than last step. Blocked energy is energy wasted but so, too, is that spent in needless catharsis. I define as 'needless' any catharsis that could have been avoided by taking care not to introduce new pain and anger. This requires at least three strategies. First we must identify and change any internalized behaviour and thought patterns that serve our oppressors. To this end, I encourage group members to use the group as an arena for practising and giving each other feedback on new behaviours. These range from being more assertive, to using constructive criticism,⁷ to asking for and letting in support, to the selective use of affirmations.⁸

In order to use our energy efficiently, the second task is to achieve clarity about what changed behaviours and methods of relating we need from significant other people.

I encourage participants to discuss life-style changes to gain support for their visions of how to relate to each other and the world in new ways. I also teach communication skills to maximize the likelihood of persuading those who are close to us to change with us.

Finally, if we are serious about not replacing old pain and anger with more of the same, we must transform the institutions that impinge upon us. This means collective action. At workshops I display feminist newspapers, magazines, periodicals, flyers announcing coming events, selected books and information on local resources for women. When working with existing collectives I incorporate skills for increasing collective power, shielding against the hostility of others and providing ongoing support. For women who do not belong to a group or collective I encourage introducing such needed support structures into their lives.

In 1980 my workshops will undergo another change in title from 'Women Emerging' to 'Celebration.' The new groups will include, as appropriate, the elements that were present in the 'Emotional Self Defence' and 'Women Emerging' workshops. The new title reflects a subtle change in attitude. It is also in keeping with my intention to explore more deeply the sensual, sexual, spiritual and creative parts of ourselves. I believe each of these to be vital sources of energy appropriated by the patriarchy. Reclaiming and integrating them will prepare us for the leadership we must take, during the Eighties, in every facet of human life.

My efforts to discover increasingly

effective ways to produce deep personal transformation in as short a time as possible stems from the conviction that we have little time to spare in our struggle to heal the planet and transform the way in which it is governed. In the Seventies many of us increased our personal power. In the Eighties we must gain access to our remaining untapped power, assist all of our sisters to do the same and find the optimal ways to channel that power.

Notes

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1. Sara Joy David, 'Emotional Self Defense Groups for Women,' *Women Look at Psychiatry* (Vancouver: Press Gang, 1979), pp. 175-81.
2. Body work is a combination of shiatsu-like thumb massage and deep abdominal breathing designed to release blocked energy. Body awareness techniques are numerous, including relaxation exercises, guided fantasy, yoga, t'ai chi and movement improvisation.
3. Sara Joy David, 'The Journey into Self,' *Cold Mountain Journal* (Fall 1977), p. 18.
4. Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978).
5. Guided body fantasy is a trip in fantasy into some part of the body. Gestalt in this case refers to a dialogue or role playing between two or more parts of the body.
6. Group visualization refers to a variety of guided images—for example, of white light entering the body through a funnel at the top of the head and filtering along the spine through the body into all the limbs and organs; or images of each group member at her most powerful, radiant and joyful.
7. Gracie Lyons, *Constructive Criticism* (Berkeley: Issues in Radical Therapy, 1976).
8. Sonra Ray, *I Deserve Love* (Millbrae, Calif.: Les Femmes, 1976) presents a good discussion of the use of affirmations.
9. See Hogie Wyckhoff, *Solving Women's Problems* (New York: Grove Press, 1977) and Diane Mariechild, *Womancraft: The Conscious Development of Psychic Skills We all Possess* (Boston, 1976).

Feminist Therapist Network

A cross Canada feminist therapist network is being developed. Please send names, addresses, phone numbers, the setting or facility in which you work, your interests and therapeutic skills to *Feminist Therapist Network*, Lucille Brooks, 355 Eglinton Avenue East, Toronto, Ontario M4P 1M5; or to Sara Joy David, R.R. #1, Galiano Island, B.C. V0N 1P0.