

This account is very typical of gestalt groups as I've experienced them. I've an almost entirely plus feeling about this process.

Food for Thought

What happens in an Esalen group? Below Beverly Silverman describes her experience of the first three days of a five day group. On pages 22-23 we present a partial transcription of a group session with Gabrielle Roth.

THE ESALEN CATALOG
July-September 1976

The group begins quietly. I move slowly. I want the people to feel safe. The first night we do some simple sensory exercises. Monday morning the tarot exercise, Monday afternoon massage and we meet again on Monday evening.

They are quiet people—scared, shy and not yet willing to take a chance. That's okay; I know it takes time for individual rhythms, paces, structures to emerge.

After a while of quiet, I ask them to make themselves comfortable and I guide them on a fantasy of "home." They imagine floating back through the years to a time when they were children. I tell them to "just settle down into that time and explore it." After a while they come back. I ask "what happened" and a few people share their experiences. Near the end of the evening Marian says that something disturbing had happened in her fantasy but she did not feel comfortable working on it in the group. I say, "Okay, I can appreciate where you are," and she leaves. I don't feel anything one way or another about it. If she says she doesn't feel like doing anything, then anything that we do after that will lead nowhere.

Tuesday morning another massage session, in the afternoon, we do some eye exercises and the camera walk. Tuesday evening, Dennis says he does not want to be in the group, but in the dance workshop where there is some excitement happening. I feel a few pangs of feeling responsible for his lack of excitement. He is a lovely guy who is trying very hard to do something good for himself. While he is doing his "thing," it occurs to me that the mind-body fantasy might give him a handle to work with, so we do that fantasy. Somewhere along in the evening Marian says that she has some things happening in relation to the mind-body exercise but is still not ready to do anything yet. She appears to be tense and troubled.

Wednesday morning there seems to be a little more energy in the group. Each time I wonder whether I really am responding to the process of the group or whether it's all in my head—after a minute or two I ask what's happening? Marian sits up and answers that something is happening with her and she wants to work with it but doesn't know how to go about starting. She starts—with the home fantasy. She goes back to a time when she is about eight years old and sitting in her classroom. At this point I tell her to close her eyes and go back to that place. She is eight years old and sitting at her desk. Her attention is on something that she has in her desk—it's a chocolate frog. She wants it but doesn't have the courage to reach for it—her total attention is on that frog—when all of a sudden she hears a voice asking, "What is the total rainfall in the lakes district in England?" At that point she feels a flush of fear, looks up and says, "I don't know." The teacher mimics her, "I don't know, I don't know, Look

here, we have an I don't know person." All this time Marian is in her fantasy re-experiencing this situation including the embarrassment and humiliation. She begins to cry deeply—she cries for quite a while and we just all sit quietly—then she goes on—she is put in another seat for "I don't know people" and the humiliation continues. When the class is over she walks out, sits on a bench, covers her face and curls up into the smallest ball that she can. At this point she begins to cry again. After a while she brings up her mind-body fantasy image of a tiger. When we did the mind-body fantasy, one of her images was of a tiger and now this tiger is back—and he is very large and frightening. She keeps saying, "I won't let anyone see my tiger. I won't let anyone see my tiger." She is experiencing a lot of fear and frustration. I ask her to look at the tiger. She doesn't want to look. He is there and she knows it and she is afraid. Again I suggest looking at the tiger—still afraid she looks and sees a gigantic tiger with large claws that are extended. He is in a cage moving around wanting to get out. She keeps saying how frightening he is—"tell him that," I say. She begins a dialogue with the tiger—she tells him how frightening he is and that he is her tiger and she doesn't want to show him to anyone—she doesn't want anyone to see him. He tells her, "You put me here." I tell her to keep looking at the tiger and she does. As she keeps looking she reports that he is getting less threatening; his claws are retracting and he is getting smaller—still in the cage. She doesn't want to open up the cage to let him out. So the tiger keeps getting smaller and smaller as though he were fading into the horizon. The cage is still there, now as a screen of bars between her and her freedom. She wants to get to the other side but doesn't know how to do this. She just keeps looking at the bars and feels her spirits going down again. The bars are too high to climb over and they have spiked tops besides. They are really big and in the way. She doesn't know what to do. After a few minutes I ask if she really wants to get to the other side and she says, "Yes," she really does. I say, "Okay, how far are you from the bars?" She says, "A few feet." I suggest that she move closer. She moves closer—I ask, "How far apart are the bars?" She says they are too close to slide through. I ask her to touch the bars; she feels them to be strong and impossible to push over. Another minute goes by and again I ask how close she is to the bars. She says she is still very close. I say to her, "Lean over and taste the bars." There is a pause. She leans over—another pause and then she breaks into hysterical laughter. She laughs and laughs and thru her laughter she says, "The bars have turned into a chocolate frog." After a few moments she opens her eyes. There is a calm about her now. We all share a comfortable silence together.

--Beverly Silverman