

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Mind Matter

8 St. Ronan Terrace
New Haven
Connecticut 06511

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Mr. Richard Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York
NY 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte

"The Association for Humanistic Psychology is a world-wide organization formed in 1962 for the development of the human sciences in ways which recognize our distinctively human qualities and which work toward the fulfillment of the innate capacities of people - individually and in society."

So runs the description of the Association for Humanistic Psychology in its announcement of its eleventh annual meeting held in Montreal from August 31st to September 3rd this year. I decided to attend that meeting, for several reasons. First, the overall aims of the Association appeal to me. Second, the program of this year's meeting contained many events that went beyond the borders of what is normally considered psychology and touched on theatre. (I'll say more about those events later on.) Finally, a work on which I had been collaborating with Jean Houston was a featured event at the meeting, and I was anxious to see audience response to it.

Humanistic Psychology branched off from the two other main stems of psychology - Behaviorism and Psychoanalysis - in the fifties. Since then it has set itself up as a 'third force' in psychology, defining its aims as the study of "creativity, love, self, growth, organism, basic need-gratification, self-actualization, higher values, self transcendence ... psychological health, etc." * Its best known exponents are probably Abraham Maslow and Rollo May. From my non-specialist view, I understand that it is looked upon with suspicion by other branches of the discipline, in part because it welcomes such fringe or "pseudo-scientific" practices as yoga, parapsychological research, the study of eastern mystical disciplines, so-called transpersonal psychology, as well as encounter groups and psychodramas, and a great deal more.

The schedule of the Association's eleventh annual meeting was prefaced by a ringing manifesto, which I'd like to quote (in part):

Humankind does seem to be running out of time as we find ourselves unable to cope with the rapid and drastic changes taking place in our world. We are told by some of our best and clearest prophets that if we have a future at all it is likely to be sterile, uninspiring and restrictive. The price for survival may be the loss

Operative definition in Journal of Humanistic Psychology, quoted in Readings in Humanistic Psychology, ed. Sutich and Vich, p.7

of much of what makes living valuable.

Our apparent inability to solve the problems of life on earth is occurring just at the time when we are developing the tools that should make this possible. We have not only achieved the technical proficiency necessary to provide a good life for the world's inhabitants, but are also developing and rediscovering ways of helping one another grow in vitality and awareness.

... If we are to create the kind of a world which is now possible for us, we must move, and move swiftly, toward a new outlook and a new understanding. If survival is for the fittest, then we must develop the states of consciousness that can enable humanity to meet the crisis and, in meeting it, move toward higher levels of being for all people.

Especially interesting to me were the sessions with a theatrical coloring. The word 'fantasy' popped up everywhere: "THE USE OF FANTASY TO PROMOTE INTIMATE COMMUNICATION" was the title of one session; another, called "LAST SURVIVORS", used fantasy "to potentiate the real experience between two people in the here and now; and there were "FANTASY AND AWARENESS EXERCISES" employed as a therapeutic tool. Even more striking were the sessions that borrowed explicitly from the theatrical metaphor: "SYMBOLDRAMA", which was "a creative trance to evoke and incarnate psycho-physical energies through the medium of mental imagery present during the hypnagogic state" (almost a working definition of theatre); or "HYPNODRAMA AND FUTURE PROJECTION", in which participants

could enter hypnosis via group induction and "experience the future through a fantasy guided toward the year 2000." In addition, the schedule offered an array of psychodrama workshops (one of them entitled "IN PRAISE OF GETTING INTO THE ACT"), and the explicitly dramatic events such as a multi-media event called "MULTIPLE INPUT and the play I had been working on.

Any conference is an intellectual smorgasbord; it's hard to achieve continuity or concentration; people wander from event to event trying them out for mental titillation or instant amusement. My own sampling was somewhat random (I saw HYPNODRAMA but not SYMBOLDRAMA), so I couldn't pass judgment on Humanistic Psychology as a whole, or even on the conference. What was interesting, though, and worth storing for future reference, was the inner rhythm of the whole event, which you could sense in two ways - in the words and phrases that kept recurring throughout the sessions, and in the response to our drama.

If you had carried a concealed microphone with you at the conference you would have heard, above the wash of complaints about being excluded from sessions, enquiries for directions,

and comments on the room service at the hotel, a refrain that would go something like this:

" ... making contact ... letting go ... getting barriers down ... relaxing ... breaking through ... relaxing ... get in touch with yourself ... let go ... I want you to know ... relaxing ... I don't want you to know ... communication ... show what you feel about ... get in touch ... think what it means to you ... relaxing ..."

These little fragments, the driftwood of conversation, are tokens of a much more clearly delineated set of needs, fears, and aspirations that I think animated almost everyone there. They expressed themselves in a constant almost nagging search for spiritual experience in some form; at the same time there was a counter-thrust toward non-verbal experience or contact, a need to feel comfortable with yourself as you were, your body and your feelings. This two-way striving, heavenwards and earthwards, was very poignant. It's one thing to know intellectually that modern man aches for unity, feels split in many directions, but it's another to be surrounded for hours on end by people who openly confess that they do not feel complete, that they have a sense of another self that is unacceptable, or unlovely, and that this other self couldn't reach out and communicate with others because it was too shy, or too inhibited, or too ugly. Many of the sessions

at the meeting were devoted to finding ways to integrate these divided selves, or to transcend them by means of some kind of high. And yet, all the time, alongside the euphoria of experimenting with the varieties of psychic experience, there was another impulse, and this is where our play seemed to hit a nerve.

In pursuit of its goal of self-actualization Humanistic Psychology opens itself to various techniques such as hypnosis, fantasy journeys, trance inductions - all of which can be heady (in more than one sense), as masks and inhibitions slip away. But people at the meeting, for all their enthusiasm about trying these techniques, often recoiled from what they felt was an attempt to organize their experiences for them. They feared manipulation, and I think they were right. All these techniques can be used to exploit, as well as to liberate, playing on emotions for power or profit. In our play, the passages that got the biggest response were those in which a psychologist, or any person who placed himself in a position of having access to superior wisdom and then attempting to change people by means of it, was satirized, or even just described. It was as if many of the things of which people had been most respectful during the day, the jargon

of Humanistic Psychology, the assorted and cosmopolitan hocus pocus by which life was hopefully to be transformed, became fair game in the atmosphere created by the play.

I came away from the meeting in two minds about what I had seen. On the one hand it was exhilarating to find so many people sincerely and fervently devoted to changing themselves and society by means of an inner adjustment - not through social engineering, or economic planning, or political theories. At the same time, it was depressing to see the dilettantism of much of what went on - the multi-media experience, for instance, called "MULTIPLE INPUT", which was billed as a "total environment, with its flow of energy, producing a new medium which plays with the viewer's sense of reality", could have been duplicated in any discotheque. On balance, though, looking at it from the niche of my special interest, it was encouraging. People with no particular stake in the theatre were finding means to express things of the most vital concern to them in a theatrical mode; and this mode was not the TV/photographic realism/quotidian-surface-of-life drama that is considered staple for most audiences, but a theatre reflecting an inner life, a world

of metaphor and collective adventure that went far beyond the boundaries of what can be seen on most commercial stages. At the same time there was a healthy resistance to trickery and chicanery, and a realization that what frees can also bind. Who could represent for us this ambiguous feeling? Who could incarnate it, and be the bringer of new knowledge and visions and at the same time appear as a dangerous charlatan and a cynical manipulator ... ? More about this some other time.

Coincidentally, this same month saw performances by three important theatre groups. Peter Brook brought his international company, which has just completed three years work in Paris, to New York; Jerzy Grotowski's Polish Laboratory Theatre was performing in Philadelphia; the New York-based Open Theatre was showing its three most recent works at St. Clements, on West 46th Street. I didn't see Grotowski's work this time, though I had watched his company on its last visit here; but I attended an all day session run by Brook at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and saw the Open Theatre's new work.

Brook is peripatetic, traveling to Persia, to Africa, and to the U.S. (east and west coasts) to refresh and renew

his company through contacts with audiences often innocent of theatre as it is generally defined. The company alternates periods of research with semi-improvised confrontations with audiences collected at street corners or in market places. One of their aims is to create an international theatre language, transcending language and cultural differences. "What we're after is transformation, a moment with a true sense of unity, not just among the actors but with (and within) the audience. For us, journeys are really supreme exercises ..."* In contrast to Grotowski, who is hermetic and secretive, Brook believes in the necessity of an audience, but he shares with Grotowski a desire to deal with a myth-forming and transpersonal level of the psyche. In his open rehearsals one of his most revealing remarks had to do with the nature of sound as communication, whether sound is a personal expression or a vehicle for an impersonal collective idea or image. This leads into some technical acting questions to which there is no easy answer, but it is interesting that he should have raised the point in this way.

In the Open Theatre's newest work, "Nightwalk", the fantasies of the dreamer are acted out, coarse and grotesque

*interview with Mel Gussow, New York Times, September 26th 1973

partial personalities stalk the stage, along with figures from the dreamer's waking world, distorted and half-remembered. Dreams. Sleep. Physical contact. Non-human sounds and animal transformations swim to the surface in their work - as they do in Brook's, in Grotowski's. And in all this theatrical activity there seems to be a powerful echo of the underlying themes of the Humanistic Psychology meeting. Words have failed us, they seem to be saying, the intellect and ideas have failed us, so return to physical gestures, basic sounds; return to dreams; use emblematic figures such as Christ, the Simpleton, Judas, with snatches of poetry (as Grotowski does); or buffoon and vaudeville types, again with snatches of poetry (as the Open Theatre does); or explore ancient folk tales and make them a springboard for the soul's quest for enlightenment (as Brook does).

Enlightenment, wholeness, self knowledge. To make whole is to cure. Thus theatre, psycho-therapy, and the needs of the community coincide. Even the Bobby Riggs-Billie Jean King match can be the occasion for thoughts on the subject. Max Lerner, in the New York Post of September 24th, was moved to write:

We keep lamenting the loss of community in the world, and the fact of loss is true enough. What we seek in community is the sense ... of common concerns and stakes, a common grammar and vocabulary of the things people

think about and do together ... When I looked at the Astrodome crowd on the screen, and around me at the huddled roomful of people watching the screen, I smelt the sweet smell of community.

In the course of the past month I've also been working on the problem of what images one could use in the theatre to help this process along. As you know, I have been interested for some time in the collection of stories, some traditional entertainments, some quite complicated fables and parables, in Boccaccio's Decameron. The central image of the plague (which is an ethical as well as a physical infection), the situation in which a group of young people try to set themselves apart from the contagion, escape the corruption of the times and insulate themselves physically and morally, and above all the stories themselves, told as a means of passing the time but in actuality providing a release for the bottled-up energies and the un-lived fantasies of the narrators, has fascinated me for some time. This summer I did some work on them and the results were encouraging. This winter I would like to take them a stage further. There are also some Sufi tales, which I would like to integrate into a piece with a western tinge. And, more immediately, there is the search for actors who can be invited to collaborate in this work. I shall have some news of how that search is progressing in my next letter.

Sincerely



Kenneth Cavander