

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KC-3
Dreams

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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
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Dear Mr. Nolte

Last month I told you how I met and worked with the four score or so actors who responded to an announcement I placed in "the trades". Now I would like to tell you what happened when I took the process a stage further.

At the end of October I was left with eighteen people whom I thought it worth seeing again. I wanted the work I did with them to serve a double purpose - to be a more searching audition and also to have some value as a tool of my own research. So I devised a single, fairly complex exercise, which I used several times; all eighteen tried it out, in groups varying from four to six people at a time. Before I describe what this exercise was and how it worked, let me go into the background a little.

Everyone is familiar with the feeling that you have reached

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an impasse in some task or relationship, that a problem is past solution by any means known to your conscious mind. Artists and nuclear physicists have this experience; people with domestic and financial problems have it too. And then, sometimes (not always), in certain states of mind - whether a half-awake state, or a distracted state, a state of exaltation or despair, or in a dream - a solution presents itself. Not thought out; not the result of any logical process, inductive or deductive; it is just there.

Where does the answer come from? What helps it appear? What is the source of this 'inspiration' and how could we tap it and learn to be in touch with it more often?

These questions are faced all the time in any creative work. But what if they could be posed, and answered, consciously as a result of certain techniques and skills developed for this purpose? That was the starting point of the exercise I developed and used last month. I summed it up for the actors by saying: the simplest and most undeniable thing you know is that you are here now, doing these things and hearing me say these words. And then you have certain feelings and sensations which your body reports to you, which you also know to be true - but less definitely, because your body can

lie. Beyond that there are indirect sources of knowledge - opinions, values, hearsay, memories - which are more or less vague and unverifiable. Suppose there is another kind of knowledge altogether, knowledge that you have but you don't know you have, knowledge such as that which a sleeper receives in a dream, and which helps him to solve a problem in waking life. Is such knowledge available to us, does it even exist, how could we create a situation in which we could get in touch with it?

The exercise that followed was designed to create such a situation, as true to life in its surface particulars as possible, a situation in which two imaginary characters reach an impasse, a point at which the needs of one can only be met at the expense of the needs of the other, and neither can give ground without violating something he wants badly for himself. Then we would make the attempt to find a way out of this bind that was not apparent to the two people who found themselves in it. This allowed the actors to show their grasp of one kind of reality, so-called 'everyday' reality, both in themselves and in their acting technique; but it allowed me to press for another kind of quality in a performer, a stretch of the imagination, an exercise of his powers of fantasy and intuition.

It might help to make clear what I mean by the original situation with which we started if I remind you of a book by R.D. Laing,

the British psychiatrist, called "Knots". In "Knots" Laing composed a series of abstract, semi-poetic models of life situations in which people find themselves at an impasse. It is not hard to create one along the same lines for oneself. Here is one I wrote for an earlier exercise:

JACK: If I take the lead, that allows you to be passive and I don't want that, so you take the lead.

JILL: I don't want to take the lead because that makes me feel I'm controlling and manipulating the situation and I don't want that, so you take the lead.

JACK: If I take the lead because you want me to, you are controlling the situation and you don't want that, so you take the lead.

JILL: If I take the lead because you want me to, that makes me passive because I'm only taking it because you want me to and you don't want that, so you take the lead.

You see what I mean.

The 'knot', then, was one element, the waking element. The actors were asked to create this situation through improv-

isation as vividly and as believably and as concretely as possible.

There was another element, though, which consisted of the other actors, two or four of them at a time; they were spectators of the scene enacted as a knot. They were also given another function. They were to stay in a special area, a kind of magic circle, marked off from the rest of the space, and in this special area we established the convention that 'dreams' could take place. The actors who were watching the scene had their entire existence in this dream space, and at a certain moment in the exercise they became dreams, the dreams of the people/^{whose}scene they had been witnessing.

That moment was reached when the two actors who were improvising the 'knot' reached a point of deadlock; each had said all he or she had to say for each side of the question and there was nowhere for them to go. They were at an impasse. Then by mutual agreement, often non-verbal, or at a signal from me, they stepped in the 'dream ground'. From that point, they ceased to behave as if they were in a waking state. They allowed themselves to become 'sleepers'; they were told they would dream, and they could have any dream they wanted. They were to give their imaginations free reign, and the other actors, up till now spectators of what was going on, had to enact, puppet-like, whatever the sleepers asked for - with one

proviso: the dream puppets had some initiative; they could change, transform, make metaphorical the instructions they received - using their own imaginations and intuitions about the scene they had just witnessed.

Let me pause here, and recapitulate the various possibilities we now had available to us.

There were two sets of people. One set had just been through an emotional experience, in which they identified with two characters who had an insoluble problem in their relationship. Their emotions, if they were good actors, should have been engaged. There was another set of people, also actors, who had been watching this scene. Their emotions would also be engaged, though in a different way. Then these two sets of people were to be brought together on common ground, where each could allow his or her fantasy to work on the problem they had all been in some way sharing. What would happen? Would there be solutions? Or would there be just a mirror of the original impasse? Or what?

The first thing we discovered was that in the circumstances we had set up for ourselves it is not easy for people to allow themselves to 'dream'. The single greatest barrier to the successful working out of this exercise was probably the

lack of a really special and set-apart place in which to work. Given this limitation, however, a fascinating variety of things could be seen happening. At the simplest end of the scale, the dreams would turn out to be an idealization of the improvisation from 'real' life, an expression of who or what each of the participants wanted himself, or the other person, to be. A variation of this was for emotions that had been held in check in the improvisation to be released: the dream figures would be asked to enact hostile or satiric versions of the characters; or the images would become split, a good and a bad side appeared, then were asked to do battle. Or the original couple would try to find alternate scenarios for what had just happened.

Then, as we worked at it longer, and people began to get a sense of what was possible in this convention, a new and less predictable set of 'dreams' emerged. It started with physical gestures, which often found a metaphorical representation of what had just been acted out, even when the other more conscious directions did not. The actors would end up in a knot, hands twisted, bodies at cross purposes, a physical entanglement that belied the verbal instructions they were being given. Then, as they freed their imaginations, transformations occurred that were both grotesque and unearthly. Dream figures would be put through a forest, for example, and after a series of strange shifts of locale find themselves at

a soda fountain, where a dialogue started between a dream figure and a sleeper, which developed into a slapstick battle with (imaginary) food as weapons. In another session, the dreams became projections of the sleepers' overriding emotions in monstrous shapes. In yet another they acted out a complete scenario of the original situation, but translocated to another set of relationships. This was not an acting out of the 'subtext', because it did not follow the pattern of the original; rather, it was a restating, in terms that were immediately communicable, of the 'real' dilemma on the level of symbols and imagery.

Obviously, used in the way it was, this exercise could not come close to exploring the depths as it should have done. Actors had only two or three hours in which to work; they could not rehearse or become totally immersed in their 'knots'; the place where the dreams were to take place was not sufficiently clearly differentiated or liberating; not everyone understood fully what was required or was able to let their imagination run free; the right kind of preparation was not undertaken; and much of the time the task was not to perfect the exercise but to let the actors show what they could do. All the same I am convinced that this is an important and productive direction to take in the future. The 'dreams' should be

brought back in to waking life; they should be recounted and interpreted, and eventually integrated. Many possibilities present themselves.

I am encouraged in all this by a talk I had in the course of the month with a member of the faculty of Princeton University, who, as I mentioned in my last letter, had been conducting what he calls a 'dream laboratory'. His approach is to take an individual through a period of meditation and concentration and provide him with a place to sleep, where he is told he will have a dream that is relevant to a problem he is facing in life. Then he sleeps in this place, which is decorated with helpful images and symbols, and on waking up he is asked to report on his dream. The model for the procedure is the ancient custom of sleeping in the temple of a god, say Aesculapius, where a person could spend the night and be visited by the deity with a cure for his ailment.

The Princeton experiments sometimes include an acting out of the dream; more often, though, they are used as a way of gaining access to images that may be helpful but unborn in the psyche. Sometimes the dreams are not explicable but this does not seem to detract from their value. There also seems to be a tendency, this researcher tells me, for the dreams to come more readily when the dreamer suggests to himself that they will be of service not only to himself but to the community.

How this all connects with my own work I am not quite sure. But I mention it as an example of the kind of synchronous event that always interests me and also provides a little consolation in lonelier moments.

The sessions I have just described wound up for the time being the testing and auditioning phase of my work. The next step is to create some specific scenarios on which I could invite a group of actors to work, hopefully early next year. And this is what I shall be spending the next few weeks doing. Also during December, I shall be working on and observing the effects of a play, based on some middle eastern legends, which I have been developing for some time.

This play, to which I referred at the end of Newsletter #1, is an amalgam of stories from the Arabian Nights, Sufi teaching fables, and Hassidic tales. In a way, it complements the workshops I was conducting this past month. These legends, so often dismissed as the baroque effusions of the middle eastern mentality, actually seem to me to contain a mysterious core of something very valuable to the west - a suggestion of alternative logics and ways of perceiving reality. But because the stories come in such an exotic garb, and present themselves

in a way that is an unnerving combination of the mystical and the farcical, that core is especially difficult to extract. For once I thought it was important for me not to direct the play so that I could stand back from it, and have the benefit of another person's imagination. This production lets the original stories, with all their twists and turns, their sudden reverses of fortune and their leaps into the miraculous, stand on their own. What will happen from this mixture of medieval Arabic and Jewish with twentieth century western technological minds? Performing it as we do in this production is one way to find out. There are other ways, which I should like to try for myself next year. Meanwhile, if you are interested in seeing this version of work in progress, it is on view at the Manhattan Theatre Club, 321 East 73rd Street, New York, (288-2500), December 11 - 15, 18 - 22, and 28 & 29. The title of the piece is MAROUF, THE COBBLER OF CAIRO.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kenneth". The signature is written in black ink and is underlined with a single horizontal stroke.

Kenneth Cavander

Received in New York on December 5, 1973