



## The Group as Sphere of Hope and Healing: *Sitting in the Silence*

(Generon Consulting report entitled "Crossing the Threshold," from their Forum on Institutional Renewal, at Mohonk Mountain House, 1999.

Discussion of story based on an edited conversation of Adam Kahane with Sheryl Erickson.)

From 1954 until 1996 Guatemala lived in conflict. In that period, 40,000 people disappeared; 200,000 were killed; and 2 million were internally displaced. We suffered a terrible war. Since 1996 we have been trying to come together as a society and rebuild.

Vision Guatemala started in 1997. The idea of the project was to bring together a group of 44 prominent people from all sectors of society—the media, the church, the military; indigenous and political leaders—to think about a future for our country.

It took a lot of logistical work and a lot of trust building to get the group together. When I arrived at the hotel for the initial meeting, the first thing I noticed was that the indigenous people were sitting together. The military guys were sitting together. The human rights group was sitting together.

I thought, "They are not going to speak to each other."

In Guatemala, we have learned to be very polite to each other. We are so polite we say, "Yes," but think "No." I was worried that we would be so polite that the real issues would never emerge.

One night something happened.

A woman, the most outstanding human rights activist and well-known fighter against impunity in the country, sat next to a guy wearing glasses. She belongs to an upper class Guatemalan family. He is a retired colonel who had worked for the Army's feared intelligence unit: G2. (Eight years ago, her sister was stabbed 27 times by an Army specialist. The man in glasses had been on duty when she went to the Army to find out what had happened to her sister.)

She stood up and said to him: "Do you remember the day I went to the Army? The day I went to ask about my sister? Do you remember what you told me?"

We were Guatemalans, and we were not being polite.

It was amazing that these two people should be able to talk. Other people started to tell their stories. You can't imagine what that meant for us. Just to be able to listen and be able to hear other people's stories and to feel empathy. We put ourselves in other people's shoes and started to understand one another.

I didn't sleep much that night. The next morning we decided to continue the storytelling and that's when the next turning point occurred.

A man who worked for the Archbishop described his experience and his feelings when he went to one of the cemeteries and found the bodies of children and women who had been massacred there. He told his story in complete, vivid detail. When he was finished, we were silent, completely silent for five minutes.

The biggest learning I had that day was the power of silence. After the silence, everything had changed. After the silence, we felt that we had an opportunity for an emerging future. I believe it was because at this point all of the reality that was ours together had been heard. That story and the silence that followed it revealed to everyone why we were there and what we needed to do.

—Elena Diez Pinto

## Commentary on The Group as Sphere of Hope and Healing:

Elena Diez Pinto's story brings into strong relief a pattern story of people coming together to create a different future out of past atrocities. In this story, sitting next to each other, are a man and a woman who have met before. "Do you remember the day I went to the Army? The day I went to ask about my sister? Do you remember what you told me?" This first action challenges the secret cultural agreement to be polite. Without prelude, opposition is heralded and a common polarity, that of victim and victimizer is set into motion. Significantly, the action does not polarize or scapegoat but evokes other stories, other truths from within the group. The conversation remains grounded in personal experience, not recrimination. This is the first mystery.

On the second day, Ronald Ochaeta, formerly the Director of the Archbishop's Office on Human Rights, told his experience of investigating a massacre. The site he visited was one of the many hundreds of "cementorios clandestinos" (or clandestine mass graves) that had been found, evidence of the army's past atrocities against rural communities. The Bishop, Monseñor Juan Gerardi, had been assassinated the day after their report was published, one year earlier.

Ochaeta's story, like the ramp in Arthur's evocation of the ecstatic darkness, takes the group down into the horror. In complete and vivid detail, he describes the exhumation of the graves. The secrets buried in the ground now are brought back to the surface of consciousness. "Here it is," he seems to be saying, "this is what we are capable of doing." The group in the room does not wallow in his words, or make speeches about injustice, or try to make meaning out of the horror. Instead there is an unfathomable silence. What is five minutes may feel like an eternity. Here, in a public space, the group is a collective witness to the unspeakable. What is happening in this silence? This is the second mystery.

Adam Kahane, who facilitated the session, recalls the silence:

"I really didn't know what to do. That's a kind of silence I'd never experienced before and I was a little flustered thinking I'm supposed to do something as a facilitator, but didn't really know what to do. So I didn't do anything. I remember looking around the circle and one man, the oldest man in the group...looking at me with a look that I interpreted to mean 'you don't need to do anything....' So I didn't do anything until some time had passed, seems like quite a long time had passed, and then I called a break."

If this was a made up tale we would certainly have an older man take up the seat of wisdom, communicating that this place in silence is what is supposed to be happening. We would understand, as the violinist Miha has said, that there is in both music and life the "holy zero"—the pause that magnetizes what has come before and what is still to unfold. The silence, and there are so many kinds of silence, is where transformation and magic can happen in groups. But this is no made up tale and not all magic has happy endings. This time, however, a transformation took place, birthing individuals with a deepened collective awareness. Many who were there remain today a force for positive change. In this pattern story, the group acts as a sphere for the whole—the good and the horror, and from its womb-like silence something new is born.

# Principle

## Element of the Experience

### Silence

People describe the importance of silence. From the silent spaces between the words, new meaning arises and fresh insights emerge towards healing and unity. People speak of having the courage to allow the pauses to lengthen and deepen, despite their discomfort.

Stories are shared, and in the sharing, sometimes reveal the deepest darkest secrets of the collective, and the shame that cries out for understanding and release. People stand silent witness, mute in the face of the extremes of cruelty and generosity that together, make up the collective soul of humanity.



"There was a silence, that went on for a very long time. A kind of silence I had never experienced before. That was the moment where something happened that many people recognized was very significant. It was the turning point of the project."

—Adam Kahane

"When the silence hits the room or the environment collectively, the shift has already happened. And the people are just becoming collectively conscious of it."

—David Isaacs

"There's a third energy...it's not just you and I, but there is a presence that is the mystery of life that is the Divine. And our willingness to be in silence allows that to be part of our communion."

—Diana Whitney

Adam recalls that at the end of the day in which there had been the silence, many of the participants spoke of its power, including Adam:

"I said, and it's sort of an unusual thing for me to say, I said that I thought it had been a remarkable moment and that there had been, I had the impression that there had been a spirit in the room, which is sort of an odd thing for me to say. Somebody else said that he thought it was a moment of communion. Now, I don't really know what the word means, but in a Catholic country [it has] a particular meaning.... I think [it's] the moment where the spirit is within us or we are connected to God. And then after that meeting one of the young guys, one of the young Mayan guys, came up to me and said, "Mr. Kahane, why were you surprised there was a spirit in the room? Don't you know that today is the Mayan day of the spirit...." So that was a moment where something happened that everybody recognized or that many people recognized was very significant. My explanation of it, to use Otto Sharmer's language, is that was the moment where the shared will of the group became apparent to the group. Where the group knew why they had come together and what they had to address."

In Adam's reflections, there is a delightful interplay of the diversity of ways we comprehend the transpersonal. For Adam, he could hardly imagine himself speaking of a spirit in the room. For a Catholic participant, these moments are when we recognize our visceral connection to the divine. For the young Mayan man, there is surprise that someone might find the presence of spirits surprising. And in Otto's words we see the outline of a group phenomenon that might be understood as collective wisdom—the moment of perceiving group will and knowing group purpose. Arthur spoke of the moment when the ecstatic darkness is paired with the ecstatic religious. And Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi's words return to me as well. He said we are always speaking in the presence of God and that at an even higher level, we and God are one—and together we are responding to the need of Earth to heal herself. The group is a portal to and a container of the transpersonal element. This is a final mystery. ■

## "Manganese Nodule"

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Found at an ocean depth of 5,420 to 4,680 meters (about 3 miles deep), latitude 24° 24' North, longitude 50° 45' West. These nodules take many millions of years to form. One millimeter forms per one million years.

Manganese Nodule actual size: 2" in diameter

# Principle

## Significance of Gathering

### Healing

People experience a deep level of healing, for themselves personally, and for their community as a whole.

There is a deep sense of forgiveness, a release of past hurts and pain, however atrocious.

And in its place remains an all-encompassing peace, which is felt embracing all present, and extending beyond the gathering deep into the communities represented. From this place of stillness then, people feel able to move forward in new and productive ways.



"There is a flow-through of shared meaning, emotion, relationship that is actually quite intangible, but very perceptible. The group tends to sense or recognize or feel aspirations that seem common to the group—underlying what people share in common before they came to the group, or that might be emerging as a result of their being in the group."

—Mitch Saunders

"People understood that they all shared the same experience. But it's not describable in words. It felt like a brotherhood. That they had gone through some initiatory process and that they really became brothers and sisters in that room."

—Sharif Abdullah