MELLANRUMMET
NORDISK TIDSKRIFT FÖR BARN- OCH UNGDOMSPSYKOTERAPI
NORDIC JOURNAL OF CHILD AND ADOLESCENT PSYCHOTHERAPY

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When the Threads Are Suddenly Severed

The Educational Group as a *Container*

In 2020, I had the privilege of participating, not only as a student but also as a translator, in the first two-year online training program in Group Analysis and Group Analytic Psychotherapy held in Iran in collaboration with Swedish teachers and supervisors. I continued this collaboration throughout the two programs that followed.

Over these years, the training program unfolded against a backdrop of profound social instability and uncertainty in Iran. Faced with these external realities, the organizers remained committed to maintaining the structure and continuity of the program. In a world increasingly stripped of certainty, this commitment became, perhaps, one of the few remaining assumptions upon which participants could rely.

As time passed, the program became something more than an educational course.

From a group analytic perspective, it could be said that something larger than an educational group emerged. A network of relationships, meanings, memories, and shared experiences gradually developed into a *Matrix*. Despite geographical distance, cultural differences, and vastly different living conditions, participants remained connected to one another through this shared matrix.

At times when the external world was characterized by instability, violence, and rupture, this Matrix became a space in which

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psychological continuity could be preserved. Individual experiences could be held within a collective context, reflected upon, and given meaning.

One of the central functions of a group analysis group is its capacity to serve as a container. What was learned throughout this program was not simply encountered in theoretical literature, lectures, or supervisory discussions. It was learned directly and lived collectively from experience.

The program became something like a maternal womb, attempting to carry those of us who were living distressfully under the constant pressure of a world marked by threat, destruction, and the possibility of collapse.

This protective buffer was created not only through analytic thinking or through the educational framework itself. Through Winnicott's perspective, It emerged through experiences of human *being* and human *holding* that transcended geographical and political borders. At times, even this experience felt unfamiliar to participants who were themselves living amidst repeated threats, attacks, and the uncertainty of a world shaped by conflict and war.

When war reaches the walls of one's city, the other is no longer experienced simply as a stranger. The other can become a threat to survival, a potential source of harm. Under such conditions, paranoia may emerge in many forms. Yet this is not necessarily pathological. Often it represents a natural and adaptive response to external reality as a psychological attempt to preserve survival in circumstances that genuinely feel dangerous.

These dynamics found their way into the programs´ reflection groups.

At times, through tears and visible pain, participants asked questions such as:

"Do you really understand what we are going through?"

"Can you truly understand something you have never had to live through yourself?"

As far as my own experience as the author of this reflection is concerned, I believe that despite all the instability surrounding it, the program succeeded in maintaining its containing function. Again and again, it offered an image of the other not as a threat, but as a fellow human being who could remain present, reliable, and emotionally available.

At the conclusion of the second program, many participants expressed gratitude that the training had continued despite ongoing doubts about whether such a commitment remained possible under unstable circumstances. They often described the program as a routine around which life could still be organized. It provided a minimal but vital sense of continuity, predictability, and meaning.

During the third program, Iran was attacked twice by Israel and the United States. At the time of writing, the country remains in a state of war. Because of internet disruptions and the unstable living conditions experienced by participants, the program was unable to reach the ending that had originally been planned.

Nevertheless, whenever circumstances allowed, seminars and reflection groups continued to be held. In this way, the educational group continued to perform its *containing* function, even under increasingly difficult conditions.

Much has been written about endings in psychotherapy, whether individual or group, voluntary or planned, personal or collective. What I wish to emphasize here is the power of external reality to alter the only assumption that seemed to remain intact within our assumption-less world.

The consequence was a profound sense of helplessness and frustration. Students were deprived of the opportunity to mourn col-

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lectively and to say goodbye to teachers and supervisors who had accompanied, held, and carried them through some of the most difficult periods of their lives.

The ending of the program itself became suspended.

It resembled a kind of limbo, a place where something is not over, yet can no longer truly continue.

This was a reality beyond our power to change, and it brought with it both suffering and anger.

Yet what was lost was not merely a graduation ceremony or an administrative event. What was damaged was the psychological process of ending itself.

Within the tradition of Group Analysis, termination is not simply the conclusion of an activity. It is an opportunity to mourn, to review a shared experience, to internalize meaningful relationships, and to transform lived experience into part of one's inner world. War and insecurity deprived the group of the possibility of carrying out this task together.

As a result, the group found itself suspended between ending and continuation. It is neither fully ended nor truly ongoing. Part of its emotional and psychological work remains unfinished, and each member carries that unfinished ending in their own way.

It has often been observed that the planned ending of an analytic group may evoke anger directed towards the group leader. What we encounter here, however, is a different form of anger.

This anger is not directed towards the leaders of the group. Rather, it is directed towards a hostile external reality.

It belongs not only to the students, but also to the organizers, teachers, and supervisors.

It is the anger born of helplessness in the face of forces beyond one's control.

Yet there is a Persian proverb which says that a thick rope woven from many strands may gradually lose its threads under pressure, but it does not break. It survives until the final strand.

I believe that throughout these years, students, organizers, teachers, and supervisors together wove such a rope.

Its strands were not only made of education and the development of knowledge in Group Analysis. They were also made of containment, holding, and the ongoing effort to understand one another under circumstances that often felt profoundly uncanny.

Perhaps this rope has now reached its final strands.

Yet it has not broken.

The *Matrix* that was woven through these years can no longer take shape in the shared educational space we once knew. Yet it continues to exist within the inner worlds of those who participated in it. The emotional bonds, shared experiences, and meanings created within this group do not disappear simply because a final ceremony has been postponed.

One might even say that what continues today is not the program itself, but its psychological life within the minds and memories of its members.

And so we continue to carry this educational group within us.

In the midst of instability and insecurity, it remains one of the few assumptions left in an assumption-less world.

We wait for a time when enough stability returns for us to complete what was left unfinished; to bring this journey to its proper conclusion and, finally, to gather for a real graduation.

A graduation that will allow us to say goodbye to one another, carrying with us all the emotions that such an ending deserves, and perhaps also a deep sense of gratitude for the time we shared together.

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