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MEMORANDUM

TO: Members of Supportive, Long-term Men's Groups
FM: Perk Clark
RE: "Our Men's Group is Stuck: What Should We Do?"
DT: July 5, 1993

Modest subtitle: 'The development of men occurs in observable stages and needs unique assistance at different moments: a case for timing, progress, structure, leadership, and direction in men's groups'

In some of the schools of Buddhism the monks get together and vigorously debate fine points of the tradition, what things mean, how to proceed. I think in some way we are replicating that model when we debate about various aspects of men's groups: what type works when, why, and with whom.

A number of you have commented to me that 'our men's group is stuck' after some years of seeing it was not the case. I have some thoughts about this I'd like to offer.

First, consider that you have changed over time, and that your needs from a men's group are changing. Second, consider your group has some ways of operating which by now are fixed, predictable, less rewarding than they once were. Third, consider that you could benefit from other methods of group work in your development as a man.

1. Begin with the idea that male humans develop in stages¹, and that they need different kinds of assistance in that development at different times in their lives; the type of development referred to here is along social, psychological, emotional lines
2. Consider that there are several different types of men's groups in vogue in the 1990's, and that those can be important for particular developmental needs for men at various stages or moments in their lives
3. Consider that there is indeed a hierarchy of development in male

behavior, a continuum from those men needing a great deal of support to those having a great deal to offer others

4. Consider that certain specific groups aid men who are working on some stage of their progress in this continuum from helpless to helpful

- a. psychiatric hospital groups
- b. addiction-cessation groups
- c. support groups
- d. feminist groups
- e. ritual groups
- f. mythopoetic groups
- g. mystical groups

5. Note that a widely practiced version of the current men's group has a 'support group' kind of appearance:

- a. the general purpose is for "individual growth," although this is not clearly defined (which would help members see if they grew or not)
- b. the general method is to "listen to the knowledge and wisdom of one another" (with the implication that others have both these qualities)
- c. the structure of the group is this:
 - i. no named leader
 - ii. no particular theory or body of information that supports or directs the group effort
 - iii. meet regularly at someone's home
 - iv. begin with a "check-in" method -- the first person to arrive talks about 'this is my week/day/moment here' and this self-disclosure repeated by all who arrive
 - v. the body of the meeting is conversation and gravitates toward the topic/issue/individual that gains the consensus [meaning, more accurately, the "attention"] of the group; this conversation is referred to as the "sharing of experience"
 - vi. members are instructed to bring compassion and integrity to the meeting
 - vii. there is some kind of a clear ending event
 - viii. some additional conventions have been: let someone who is talking finish; attend all meetings; keep what is said confidential; disclose more information about your topic if you are requested to do so; don't confront or criticize others

6. This structure meets a number of criteria for a generic support group whose purpose is to help members gain assistance, advice, support, strength, insight into their own and others' behavior, to assist in the pursuit of various psychological, behavioral, emotional, and social goals in their lives

7. It should be emphasized that at a certain point in a man's development the technique of "sharing of experience" is important, and that those in groups who want that to continue should do so as long as they feel they are

gaining knowledge of one-another and themselves from that technique

8. A valid criticism of the "sharing of experience" technique is that it becomes (like any technique) the next place for the members to get 'stuck in their progress;' the "sharing" is elevated to a high goal where people do much of it but don't develop or progress after they learn to open up about what they are thinking and feeling

9. When stuck this way, the members miss out on something crucial -- that many people who feel that they are "sharing experience" are in fact most commonly:

- a. offering random opinions rather than describing their actual experience in the present
- b. reacting mechanically as they always act in similar situations
- c. reacting in ways that stimulate them emotionally without knowing that is their goal or their genuine action
- d. reacting to get and maintain an others' attention
- e. reacting to dominate a situation or to keep from being seen as participating in a situation
- f. reacting to avoid some consequence (like experiencing their own anger, or shame, or fear, or boredom)
- g. expressing, in a covert form, an emotional moment which is being distorted with a story that minutely alludes to the feelings which have been stimulated

10. Authentic and accurate "sharing experience" is of value in the realm of friendships and social life and getting to know people, but it is has to be combined with other forms of participant behavior and sometimes ignored completely when trying to push into what I would call 'intimate realities' of other people, and when pushing into developmental efforts that involve more intentional identification of deficits and strengths, and the counteracting of the former

11. The structure and methods employed in a group have everything to do with the essential purpose of the group; the essential purpose of the men's support group structure is to enhance the social-emotional skills and knowledge of the participants to help them better cope with their lives

12. Other types of groups are applicable to men who experience sufficient support in their lives and are curious about what might be available to gain after they have learned to gather and maintain a supportive environment for personal and professional development

13. One form of that group is described in technical religious or psychological literature and is said to be designed to develop 'higher perceptive capacities' or intuitions about life, as well of methods of

thinking that are non-linear, holistic in nature and not influenced by fixed assumptions and culturally-inspired beliefs

14. A group whose basic purpose is to develop the intuitive, (also known as 'mystical') side of the participants advocates this list of group-structure-rules²:

- a. meet regularly in a secure location in confidence
- b. allow the group leader³ to lead employing the theories and techniques that fit within his study tradition
- c. no guests-visitors-new members unless added by the leader for specific learning experiences of the group
- d. participants' aim to:
 - i. observe your own reactions to what occurs in the setting, as well as others' reactions
 - ii. pay active attention and participate fully
 - iii. study the materials that are recommended to you in the order that they are recommended
 - iv. study what time this is in your life and realize that certain actions-information will help you move through this and develop from it, and that other actions-information will not help you at this time
- e. understand that you are in a particular place and that certain suggestions are a function of that place
- f. expect that you will notice some tangible gain from the group experience, but not necessarily at the rate, nor in the way, that you might expect it
- g. propose that people who are disinterested in this model not seek to be members of this particular group

15. The leadership of this group would be said to be following a spiritual tradition of group organizing, which has a particular orientation and guards against a variety of potential abuses by the group leader⁴:

- a. a genuine spiritual organization is run in such a way as to assist the group members in making the shift from a self-centered life, to one that is Truth-centered
- b. an organization in which the methods of operation enhance selfish intention can be judged dysfunctional: such a group may do a good job of meeting other needs, but it is not actually engaged in spiritual development; for example:
 - i. members told that if they left the group they would be damned
 - ii. members were told that terrible things had happened to people who left the group in the past
 - iii. note that fear for one's safety is not the sort of motivation that promotes spiritual development
- c. some groups appeal directly to the members' greed: they maintain that only group members will receive the divine pleasure: bliss, that the leader can convey
- d. indeed, extensive use may be made of procedures that bring about

dramatic alterations in consciousness (sensory experiences induced, are called Knowledge)

e. these unusual experiences are then interpreted as proof that paradise awaits faithful followers

f. some groups promise happiness, or power

g. some groups appeal directly to members' vanity, with considerable use of flattery (lavishly bestowed attention and praise) -- or the conveying of the message that the new member has shown marvelous spiritual discernment by joining them

h. attention of any kind may be enough to accomplish seduction, whether in the form of praise or even severe rebuke (these are appeals to egotistical concerns, and indicate the corrupt character of the group and its leader)

i. the manipulation of guilt is another sign that a group is spurious; basically, this establishes a regressive relationship between the leader and the group; this is used in various schools of indoctrination, brain-washing, thought-reform

j. real mystical schools are aiming at a type of development; indoctrination is not development: it is the substitution of one belief system for another; if a group makes extensive use of indoctrination components, it is a sign that its purposes are mundane; these components include:

i. rejection by the group, alternating with acceptance and approval

ii. the arousal of guilt

iii. repetition of dogma

iv. restricted access to outside information

v. restricted privacy

vi. attacks on a person's previous affiliations and way of life

k. both new and traditional religious group often have components of indoctrination

l. this is in contrast with the mystical literature's emphasis on the need to acquire freedom from fixed assumptions and culturally derived beliefs about the self, God, causality, good and evil

m. furthermore, indoctrination is antithetical to the development of individuality, which this literature makes clear is crucial to the developmental process, and must eventually manifest itself (Rabbi Sushone on his deathbed: 'When I get to the world to come, they will not ask me, 'why were you not Moses?' they will ask me, 'why where you not Sushone!')

n. spiritual development requires the opposite of indoctrination: learning to discern how one's perception of the world is influenced by egocentric thought and motivation

o. groups that use indoctrination methods are not legitimate spiritual groups; their leaders are not entitled to the authority claimed by legitimate spiritual teachers, which could render them immune from conventional criticism

p. bogus leaders fall back on the argument of spiritual authority as justification for their exploitive acts

q. relating the leader's behavior to the requirements of spiritual development offers a reply to this argument

r. it is because a leader's role is functional, rather than magical, that genuine spiritual leaders can be seen to obey implicit rules

s. careful attention to traditional to teaching stories demonstrates that there are certain principles that are never violated: competing for the teachers's attention; one student harming another; a student having sex with the teacher, or a teacher enriching him/herself with a student's money

t. the reason such examples are absent is that real teachers do not use their students to advance their own personal interests: they do not have license to exploits students in any way

u. the only legitimate basis for the teacher's actions is to advance the student along the spiritual path

v. this is not to say that larger purposes may not be served at the same time: indeed, such synchronous activity is said to be the norm, but it is never at the expense of the student's development

w. indeed, the genuine spiritual teacher obeys functional requirements that far exceed the restraint that most people impose on themselves in the name of religion or common decency

16. this memorandum is a long-winded way to outline that I am longing for another type of group, one with a purpose and methods as cited above, or with completely different elements that would accomplish a similar goal

17. This also means that I do respect your right to pursue your own developmental effort, and recognize how instrumental you have been in putting these things together and keeping them going -- for that, you have my gratitude and respect!

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¹Wilber, K. (1980). The Atman Project. The Theosophical Publishing House: Wheaton, Illinois.

²Shah, I. (1978). Learning How to Learn. London: Octagon Press.

³Clark, C. F. (1992). The intentional development of men: essential elements for men's groups. Unpublished manuscript, pp. 12-20. (Available from C. F. Clark, 40 East 14th Street #5, Tucson, AZ 85701).

⁴Synopsis: "Evaluating Cults" by Arthur Deikman, MD Tape Recording: Institute for the Study of Human Knowledge, PO Box 43, Los Altos CA 94023