

**The Medium,
the Message,
and the
Good Group Dream**

Harold N Boris

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By now I was able to move in—slow zoom to medium shot—on the group. Two matters interested me equally. One was the question of what sort of work one could usefully do if, to make the event usable, one couldn't ask people to talk or work or otherwise cooperate. The second was what people might do with the space left for them. The reason, after all, for the analyst to be self-effacing is not to hide himself, but to create room for the devolution of the patient into the encounter. If one left people to their own devices, by restricting one's own, what would happen?

It is very peaceful not to have to lead groups (or psychotherapies) or otherwise conduct them. One doesn't have to begin the encounter by leaving the false impression that one knows how it could or should work, an illusion which itself might benefit from perusal. People who know each other—for example, staff or residents who work together—need, they often feel, to be careful of what they let each other know. So much do they wish to be singled out in what they feel would be a good way that they are terrified to be singled out in a bad. Can they be left their anonymity and still discover what they are like when they are with others?

The medium, according to Marshall McLuhan, is at once the message and the message. He was, of course, speaking of books and television. But he might have been speaking of groups as well, for in groups, too, the medium is contrived, at one and the same time, to both express and exemplify, convey and elicit.

In groups the medium is behavior—more precisely, enactment. I do not have in mind here the verbal-nonverbal distinction. Rather, I am speaking of the whole of behavior, including verbal and nonverbal elements, as being the medium by which groups attempt to achieve what they are after. If then, we focus less on what people in groups say than on what they do, we become the beneficiaries of a great deal of information concerning what groups are about.

Using this fund of information, I shall discuss the behavior of groups as representing a collective dream from which, as I shall show, it is possible to reconstruct the latent wishes of the group, or what I term the Good Group Dream.

Consider that we are now sitting with a group, quietly absorbed in the proceedings. Part of our attention is wide open to the group, the remainder to what, in response to the group, is occurring in ourselves. Someone is speaking; others are listening; still others are in various modes of abstraction or inattention. As the speaker concludes, someone enters a parallel experience or opinion. Someone else disagrees. A fourth becomes his ally. A fifth then comes in, perhaps to join the fray, perhaps to take a middle course. And so it goes. But sooner or later a

silence falls and all eyes turn to us. Clearly something is now expected of us, but what? We pause, hesitate, summoning and collecting our thoughts.

My own experience, at moments like these, is in the form of a fantasy. I feel like the spectator at a play who is suddenly given to realize that, unbeknownst to himself—perhaps before he entered the theatre or during a momentary lapse in attention—a part in the play has been assigned to him. And now he has not only missed his cue line, he is holding up the play. It is as if no one can proceed until he has assumed his role.

But even while playing host to this fantasy, the group seems to have resumed its own activity. On our part, we feel some relief. Yet we cannot quite get resettled on our observing seat. We have been served notice that something is expected of us in this arena and very likely we shall be called upon again.

And indeed, as we tune into the proceedings once again, we find that the group is essentially repeating its previous activity, only—in the words of the song—“a little bit louder and a little bit worse.” If we thereupon get the feeling that the group assumes that some lack of subtlety and perception on our part was responsible for our poor performance previously, we are not likely to be much mistaken. For not only is the activity a bit more strident and insistent, like the second ringing of an alarm clock, but, sure enough, it is soon followed by another requiring silence.

This time not all eyes turn to us. Some appear to be averted as if to spare us witnesses to our humiliation; others are turned away as if to discount expectation. But even so there is a signaling silence, more forceful than the first.

At this juncture we are likely to be able to see that the group is acting as if it had a theory—almost a conviction—that if they do such-and-such, as they have, and if they say thus-and-so, which they have, then we, in turn, will come forth with a contribution of our own.

Now, to be sure, the group is not reporting this at the moment, though if we hesitate any longer it may make itself more explicit. Rather, it is signaling it, as if in mime. Its expectation seems to be that we know the theory as well as they. And, of course, we do. We know it as well as we know that someone who finishes a spoken sentence without lowering the inflection of his voice proposes to continue speaking, but when he lowers his inflection and provides a caboose on the end of his train of speech by ducking his chin and lowering his head, he is done.

So, then, let us suppose that we do comply with the group's theory and venture some remarks. Suppose, for example, we say exactly that we have inferred, namely, that the group is acting as if it were host to a theory that when it does such-and-such and says so-and-so, interpolating here both mode of action and verbal theme, something of value will be forthcoming from its therapist. Since most people in therapy groups do, after all, come for our assistance in understanding their behavior, this seems a reasonably valuable contribution.

The people in the present group, however, do not seem to share this view. At best, they appear lukewarm toward our remarks. Some, indeed, seem quite stunned; it is as if what we said were irrelevant, incompetent, and immaterial. And that would be putting it politely. Others seem actively mistrustful, as if victims of a practical joke, and a bad one at that. One or two people seem inclined to regard our comment as a piece of grit in the clockwork, although perhaps one with a pearl concealed in it.

At the same time as they make their reception of our contribution evident to us, the members of the group are also taking stock of one another's reactions. This activity and its consequences will now begin to involve the group, for as they check one another out, each is likely to act on (or hope someone else will act on) what he finds. As we settle back to observe what ensues, we shall shortly see members acting as if the differences in reaction to our comment pose a threat. Efforts designed to change others in the direction of one's own or at least a common position will be made by various members of the group. It is quite as if the group shared the conviction that "united we stand, divided we fall."

Indeed, although there may be impassioned conflict, we shall soon gain the impression that the conflict is in the service of an attempt at union. As we listen, we may then come to the view that the group is acting as if it had two further aspects to its implicit theory: first, that there is great strength in numbers providing there is unanimity, but, second, that there is jeopardy in making a common cause which imperils one's own private theory about how things should be.

The basic problem for the members of the group at this point will therefore be that of finding a group common denominator which accounts for three factors: (1) what is wrong; (2) what will remedy the wrong; and (3) how to get from wrong to remedy.

Those who have felt tricked and abused will feel doubtful about looking to us for any further remedies and will advocate looking elsewhere, or developing self-sufficiency, or employing themselves in place of us as remedies.

Those who felt us merely to be stupid and incompetent may either hold for giving us another chance at some other sort of problem or else advocate, usually through example, some other means of delivering both message and massage. Those who are convinced that a pearl lies within the grit may empearl our comment by deprecating their own ingratitude and their competence to receive it.

Each, and such other exemplified prescriptions that may emerge, will be in effect advocating their own characteristic (and characterological) means for realizing their dreams of group therapy.

Teachers of English call such sentences as “Do that” or “Come along,” “you-understood” sentences, meaning that the subject of the sentence is so clearly the pronoun “you” that the speaker can omit it. As we listen to the interaction that takes place in the group at this juncture, the object is equally so obvious that it seldom receives mention. The object is “us,” the group’s leader. And if we do not surmise that at the moment, we shall, directly the group leaves the huddle and lines up for its next play.

The so-called topic of discussion might be anything, but the thrust and meaning of the discussion will reflect the compromise solution that the group has come up with as the result of its efforts to find a common denominator. Let us suppose the topic is parents, bearing in mind it could as well be doctors, political leaders, children, people, bosses, or men. Whatever the topic, the way it is discussed will, as we listen, convey to us a message, as if it were a parable or a morality play.

We will know that parents fail children. We will also hear why parents fail children. This last will ascribe a motive that is designed to massage us. It may be calculated to invoke our guilt or our gratitude for the group’s generosity. It may be contrived to summon our anxiety—for example, through tales of children leaving home—or to awaken our sympathy. Even so, there may be a minority report or dissenting opinion also offered, a verbal stick added on to the prevailing carrot, conveying that in some quarters the theory is that talking to us is simply a waste of breath.

Then, once again, silence will fall. I say “silence,” but perhaps this time the group is wary and will no longer expose its expectations. Still, the silence will be audible within the talk, for at the point where, in a more optimistic group, silence might have fallen, there will be behind the talk a hollow, echoing sound that expresses the vacuum that we are to fill.

We are now in a position to infer that the group has found a common answer not only for how to get from wrong to remedy but for what the remedy is. From these inferences, it is a fairly simple matter to infer the group's diagnosis of what is wrong with it.

Were we to interpret all of this, we might say: "The group has acted as if it has a theory that if their parents had not failed them, and I would not fail but rather help them, then it would have abandoned and now still could abandon being angry and helpless and instead achieve good successes."

Were we, in fact, to say something like that, we could expect a fairly mixed reaction. There is likely to be some relief that we at last, if at least, see what is expected of us. And we could expect some vexation at the fact that our good understanding has failed to get translated into the requisite action. These are likely to be the primary reactions. Secondly, we can expect to see reactions to the renewed conflict which our interpretation has posed for the group. In respect to this last, it is as if a fractious union (or management) has finally and painfully agreed among itself on a bargaining position and strategy, only to find the other party unresponsive.

But let us leave our particular group there and reflect further on what we have discerned so far. Groups, we inferred, act as if they had an "if this, then that" theory which included a contribution from the therapist that would satisfy some deficiency or rectify some defect the group felt itself to have. Moreover, we inferred that groups took certain means by which they hoped at once to convey a message and deliver a message, both of which were calculated to elicit the requisite remedy from the therapist. The remedy wanted, furthermore, was something that would alleviate internally conflictful experiences.

On the other hand, people in groups are generally realistic enough to know—if not to appreciate—that hopes for such wishes are more dreams than certainties. In deference to that realization, I have found myself thinking of the unconscious wishes of the group as a Good Group Dream.

That Good Group Dream is for the membership of the group plus its leader to together constitute a utopian universe in which only perfect experiences take place. These perfect experiences are of two sorts, and in the basic version of the dream, the fulfillment of one sort is assigned to the group and the other to the leader or therapist.

As regards the first, each member dreams that the others will join him in a unanimity of viewpoint and a community of intention. This will, in turn, give him several fine experiences. It will prevent any apprehensiveness

lest the other members, individually or collectively, gang up against or in rivalry with him. On the contrary, in that unity of purpose, they will, he hopes, lend him the strength of their numbers and the diversity of their special skills. Thus, given such a consanguinity, he need neither fear nor envy but can feel augmented by, and grateful for, such strengths as are represented in the group.

That divine unanimity also means that he will feel Right (in terms of conscience), True (in terms of consensual validity), and Good (in terms of ideals)—a state of self-abrim with the value to which self-estimation can freely and unhesitatingly flow. In this aspect of the dream each member is but part of an enlarged self, a kind of super-self, rich with quality and competence, untroubled by internal doubts. And in the dream members believe that such mutual identifications can occur through a process of condensation and distillation reminiscent of what Freud called the “dream work.”

If the motto in that first portion of the dream is *e pluribus unum*, that for the portion of the dream involving of the therapist is *vive la difference*, for to the therapist is assigned the countervailing function of being the differentiated person present. The therapist, in the dream, is he who has the equipment, supplies, and willingness to fulfill the group's various libidinal needs. When they feel little and afraid, he is to be big and brave; when they are empty, he must be rich and full with succor; when they are combative, he must be yielding; and when they are excitedly defiant, it is for him to be excitedly (but not too excitedly) exacting. In short, he is cast as the perfect reciprocal to their each and every wish and sense of defect.

Each portion of the group's dream is designed to make possible the other. The group could not dream of such basic and manifold fulfillments from its relationship with the therapist were it not for the antidote to guilt, shame, and anxiety its perfect mutual identifications afforded it. On the other hand, it could not sacrifice the possibility of reciprocally differentiated relationships within the group—which must be sacrificed if identifications of such completeness are to be made—were it not for its good dreams of the therapist. Thus, only when the parts are together and in harmony can the whole Good Group Dream be realized.

Utopias, however, escape capture. The latent content of the dream must succumb to the intermixture of factors that compromise it. One man's meat turns out to be another's poison. Some members turn out to need to renounce pleasures to avoid pain, while others arrange compensatory alternations, and others still meld wish and guilt into what may seem unappealingly tepid compromises. The group must, therefore, evolve a manifest dream that accounts

for the members' various primary urges, their special defensive preferences, their particular anxieties, their preferred cognitive and expressive styles, and their unique transference anlagen.

At the same time, because the group's enactment of the dream so successfully discharges impulses, its nature and meaning and its function as the source for the behavior that attempts to achieve it may fail to become conscious. As therapists, therefore, we will choose not to comply with, but rather bring to light, the function assigned us in the dream. If, thereby, we too contribute to the dream's frustration, such is the determination of the dreamers that in the face of each frustration they will but elaborate a modified edition designed to prevail where the previous ones have failed.

Let us now return to the group we left to pursue these thoughts.

We noted that the activity of the group proceeded in cycles. At one point in the cycle of action, the group was preoccupied with assembling and welding the components of what was to be a collective position. This was to fulfill the group portion of the dream that calls for unanimity. At the same time, each member had to advocate his own view or combat another's in order to assure that his own individual elements would be part of the collective dream. Much, if not most, of this activity was implicit. People told of experiences, feelings, or events. But each of these anecdotes had a moral. They were illustrative of a thesis. The way they were told, moreover, was designed to have an impact.

What was being worked out were such issues as whether parenting was needed (the group could as well, we noted, have framed matters in terms of men, doctors, bosses, etc.), and, if so, what kind. Then, too, the group confronted the risk of disappointment or loss of self-esteem. They determined the means by which the precisely favorable response could be achieved: should it be earned, won, or demanded, and by what measures? At length, these matters were compromised and a collective edition of the dream drafted. It was as though a repertory company had written or revised a script, and now, secure in its common understanding of the purposes and thrust of a scene, could turn from one another and, with each in his assigned role, turn to play upon us. Then, when the scene ended, silence fell, and we were expected to supply the response the scene was designed to elicit.

Our response was, however, to locate the dream and its components—wish, anxiety, and defense—that lay within the action. As interpretations do, this facilitates the group's capacity to narrate, rather than dramatically enact, its dream, and in doing so, gain distance from and conscious perspective on that dream. To be sure, this narrative

and analytic activity will only exist partially; even it will soon find a place in the medium by which the group attempts to activate its dream. But in time the accumulative effect of interpretations by the therapist and responsive narrative by the group will enable the stuff of the group's dreams to be more evident to it and thus more susceptible to its will for conscious management.