

GROUP WORK

Any group is a group by virtue of the following features: it consists of a number of people whose aims coincide, and who are prepared to share a common environment, vocabulary, experience and so on. Groups differ according to their aims. In what follows, it will be assumed that the aim of those who are in a Saros group is that they want to change, or grow in some way. The phrase 'Saros group' is intended to cover all groups whose ways of working are compatible with those of specifically Saros groups.

You already know the familiar world which you have constructed for yourself over the years: the change that you want is supposed to affect this familiar world, to make it less constrictive, to open up new horizons. In order to achieve this aim, it is not necessary to work in a group, but it is part of the purpose of this introduction to group work to show that it can help. We all know how unstable such intentions are: they are quickly forgotten or diverted. The work of a Saros group, in short, is to provide an environment within which you can pursue the work of change.

A word of warning: you know already from your experience that any change sought and achieved is never quite as anticipated! If it was, then it would not be a change: what I can anticipate now is necessarily within my present framework, but any real change alters the framework, so that the actuality is bound to be different from the anticipation.

The word 'change' is tricky. The change that you want will not necessarily be noticeable to an external observer: your hair will not go white overnight. The change that we're talking about is internal change; to achieve new horizons, you need only let go of the old horizons. The work of a Saros group is designed to facilitate that letting go. It will do this, if you really want it and are prepared to do the work for it.

The talk of old and new horizons is a bit simplistic. If I shed my old horizons and gain new ones, then those new ones may quickly become old. The work of a Saros group is not designed simply for such reconditioning: it is designed for ever new horizons, for the constant quest of gaining and letting go again, in order to gain more, only to let go again...

It is difficult to be specific about the activities of groups such as Saros groups, because there is no such thing as a typical one: the activities vary according to the individuals who make up the group. Even at the general level, one group may be more inclined towards theory, while another may tend towards working on the body through movements. But whatever the channel used, the work will be carried out so as to provide the type of environment outlined above.

Let us take the least obvious case, which is theoretical work. The group might start by considering large questions like 'What is a human being?' or 'What is time?' These are philosophical questions, but the approach is unlikely to be academic. Philosophy means, literally, love of wisdom, and wisdom is a practical ability. A wise person is a person who can act correctly.

What on earth, you ask, can the relation be between considering what time is and acting correctly? In order to act correctly, you need to be able to perceive what is required by the particular event you are facing; you need to be able to perceive the uniqueness of any event. As it is, we do not normally do this. To take a trivial example, you do not see your front door afresh each time; you see it through the gloss of remembering what it was like when you first saw it - and that may have been years ago. But as a matter of fact, the paint has flaked a little more, the light is different now, and so on.

In short, we muddle our ways through our days, without really noticing what's going on. But what is going on now, at this instant, is simple, and is just what it is. In order to perceive this, you need only stand back and look. Big questions like 'What is time?' encourage standing back, just because they are big.

In a Saros group, it is probable that no firm conclusions will be drawn about the nature of time or humanness or whatever. The questions will be left open-ended, to encourage continued investigation, rather than accepting the horizons of answers.

Again, the theoretical work of such a group may include employing some models or diagrams of things: the discussion of the 'big questions' might lead to the development of such models. But these are just maps. The purpose of becoming familiar with a map is to be able to discard it and walk the terrain alone and unaided. So no model will be introduced as the truth; it will be used only if it is a useful tool within the group. For instance, a model of human faculties and their interrelations may be useful to order and simplify your multifaceted and confusing experience of yourself, so that you gain some understanding of yourself, and of what it is to be human.

So the theoretical side of such group work is practical philosophy, and disciplines that most slippery of faculties, the rational mind. It is practical, because it encourages detachment and simplifies complexity. How, after all, are you to achieve your aim of expanding your horizons? It will not happen without working on it; but neither will it happen if you try forcibly to demolish your present construct, since such drastic measures in effect accept the construct as a force to be reckoned with. It will happen only if you stand back and detach from the construct.

Whatever work (theoretical, physical, etc.) is being pursued in the group, certain exercises will be done as well. Sometimes exercises will be done within the group meeting; but there will also be exercises to practice throughout your days. These are designed to wake you up from the semi-conscious state that is normally called wakefulness; to help you to be aware of the present moment, because it is only then that you can be detached from your surroundings. There is a moment before an event is an event-with-such-and-such-a-quality. There is a faculty which has access to that 'moment before'. The exercises are designed to wake up that faculty: this is the work of detachment, or liberation of consciousness. In that empty moment, there is the possibility of choice and free will. It has potent exercising choice gives the event potency. That potency informs a bigger world of increased horizons, a world where growth is possible. To verify this, you have only to reflect on your experience of meaningful moments.

Such moments normally come on us at random. The work of a Saros group helps you to have more control: you can be in charge, not 'it' or 'them'. The exercises are exercises in the plural, because there is no single, learnable technique to waking up: if there were, somebody would have given us the secret long ago! It is rather a matter of constantly tricking oneself into overcoming the vast inertia of one's present world, so that one can wake up as often as possible. Consider this: if you do not know what is moving you at any instant, then it has power over you.

What is it about the actual moment-by-moment nature of a Saros group which guarantees that it will be an environment for growth? One of the first things you would notice about such a group is that there is a group leader. This person is not a guru, but he or she does have experience in group work, and so is able to maintain the environment. First, then, it is a group leader's job to maintain direction - not in the sense of any specific direction, but of keeping alive the idea that there is always further to go.

Second, the group leader does not teach as such, but keeps the environment educational. The difference is this: teaching is putting in from outside, while education is drawing out from inside (that is the literal meaning of the word). As described above, both the theoretical and practical aspects of group work have the flavour of 'Suck it and see!' Anyone who imposes their views on you is not giving you that chance to investigate.

Look at it this way. You want to grow; but growth requires fresh food. It should be clear from what has already been said that the work carried out in a Saros group is designed to help you gain such fresh food - new impressions and so on. It should also be clear that it is up to you: no one else can give it to you, for instance by teaching. A group leader cannot either, but he or she can keep alive the search of each member of the group for fresh food - and that is an educational environment.

This brings us to an important point: working in such groups is not easy. It is a lot easier to be told by someone in authority what to do or what to think, but that is not what happens in Saros groups, it is up to you from the moment you join. You want to change, and as described above the change involves having more control over your own life: such self-responsibility is encouraged in a Saros group from the very start, even though it is hard.

In order to maintain this environment, a Saros group works under a degree of discipline. This is not externally imposed discipline, with a system of rewards and punishments: it is your own self-discipline.

To an extent, the sort of discipline involved is little more than politeness to the other members of the group. For instance, you can assume that they are there because they want to work, so it is polite to be on time for the meetings and not keep people waiting; or you can assume that they have something to contribute, so it is polite to attend to whatever is being said or done and not to be rehearsing at this time what you want to say or do next.

The discipline of a Saros group has the sole purpose of keeping the group meetings an environment for growth and change. This can be seen from two points of view: minimal personality and maximum trust. As already said, you already know your familiar world, the world of your personality; so if you really want to change, it makes sense not to make your personality prominent. You are meeting with a number of other people: this in itself can make you aware that your own cherished world-view is not the only possible one, but it still takes self-discipline to hold that awareness - to listen to others, not to criticize others, or whatever it takes. This also prevents some of the pitfalls of group work, such as one person (including the group leader!) taking over the group, or one person being excluded, or the meeting degenerating into a social gathering. In a Saros group, you can work with your best friend, your worst enemy and people you do not know at all, and it should make no difference.

Now consider the same point from the aspect of group trust. If you are prepared to remain curious, to listen to others, and so on, then they will not have to resort to their personalities - and since they are doing the same for you, then neither will you! It is impossible to work in a group if the impression is there that, implicitly or explicitly, some people are sniggering at what others say or do. If that feeling is present, how are people to defend themselves? They are bound to resort to the alibis and aliases of their usual personalities. Discipline is crucial for group work.

What will you get out of group work? As much as you put in. (It should be noted that you will not be putting in much money: the group needs to cover its running costs - that's all. Your commitment is of far more value to yourself and to the group than your money!) The work is designed for the sort of change outlined, and if you put in the work, it'll do the job.

Saros groups tend to meet weekly, or at least regularly. There is great virtue in regularity, not the least of which is that it boosts your original intention, whatever it was, which led you to the group in the first place. A meeting will typically last between sixty and ninety minutes.

Even such a brief sketch of working in a Saros group would be incomplete without this. At the root of all humour is the ability to stand back and see that something 'real' is not so real: working in a Saros group can be great fun! The work is not worth doing unless you take it seriously, but it is also not worth doing unless you enjoy it.