An Architect’s View of the Larger Group

Thank you so much for this opportunity.

It forced me to think through how I conceptualise Larger Groups and how they can help us to meet contemporary challenges.

When I was invited to speak, it was suggested that I speak about something from Patrick de Maré’s tradition. Looking back over thirty years of conducting Larger Groups all over the world, I realise that I have experience Patrick did not have. My work is a development of this tradition. In contrast to the more usual one-off events, almost all the groups I conduct are on-going groups. I have also used the thinking in management and community work. It is this experience that led me to organise the first on-going training in Larger Group thinking in the de Maré tradition. It starts in January 2019, has an innovative design and is in a wonderful setting in the English countryside.

So, what is the de Maré tradition?

As a long-term member of the Wednesday Large Group and subsequently its conductor/convenor, I have many memories of the things Pat said, but did not write down. This is a precious legacy.

****** TWO STRANDS WOVEN TOGETHER

Pat had a vision that frames his theory. He passionately believed in the Larger Group as a way of humanising society. I took this possibility very seriously during the eighties while working on social housing estates as an architect and initiated Large Group dialogue with disaffected tenants. Not only were their physical surroundings transformed, but their social situation as well. I wrote about this work in, Design through Dialogue.

****** PATRICK DE MARÉ’S APPROACH

The de Maré approach is not widely understood. Although based on Foulkes’ theory, it is different. On the Study Day in May, one senior member on encountering the group of 130 set out as two large concentric circles, was overheard exclaiming under his breath, “This is wrong. The chairs are too far apart!” Is it wrong or a just set of different assumptions? Learning to ‘speak up’ across the open space is a way of becoming a citizen with a voice.

I sense that Pat’s early life experiences put him in touch with how profoundly, prevailing cultures influence us, and it is this idea that influences his theory. He often used to say, “It is not the individual who is unconscious but the culture that does not allow the thought to be voiced” (1991, p.77).
As an eleven-year-old, he was sent to what he described as a ‘mini-concentration camp’, or boarding school. In his twenties, he worked in a WW2 Army Exhaustion Centre behind the front line in Normandy, treating soldiers suffering from combat fatigue.

Apart from witnessing the horror of war, he would have been aware of the official line that British soldiers were malingering to get away from the fighting. Comparisons were made with German soldiers who appeared not to succumb to battle fatigue. British thinking then was that German soldiers were influenced by Nazi propaganda that Germany faced total annihilation. Later it was thought that the concept of battle fatigue did not exist in the Nazi mindset. ¹

***** IT’S NOT JUST ABOUT NUMBERS

According to Pat, Small Groups, Median Groups and Large Groups all have particular qualities arising from their size. Not everyone agrees but I have noticed that participants often remark on how daunting it feels to enter a room with a big circle of chairs and hanker after the Small Group.

My experience is that there is a continuum from small to large where the size of the circle and experience of the participants influences what emerges. One person’s Large Group is another person’s Median Group. It is also a question of what is in the foreground of our attention. In Larger Groups, cultural assumptions tend to emerge first while the family of origin emerges more prominently in the Small Group. It is a matter of emphasis.

It also depends on where the conductor places her attention, how she understands what is happening and what role she is seen to represent. In a classroom-sized group, she might be unconsciously seen as a teacher, while in a very large group, as a president or government official. There is much more to be said about what this means in terms of conducting.

In this context it’s interesting to note that Daleham Gardens is an old house. Its physical structure does not lend itself to anything other than the Small Group. When we try to have a Larger Group there, we use two living rooms uncomfortably linked together. There is rarely a circle – just a kind of squash. This ‘squash’ influences how Larger Groups are imagined in the group analytic community.

***** AN ARCHITECT AS A GROUP ANALYST

Sitting in a café recently with two designer friends I found myself explaining, not for the first time, how it is that an architect becomes a group analyst! It was through this conversation that I began to understand how my experience of designing and constructing buildings has led me to view the Larger Group as a place where a unique form of creativity can emerge, where new thoughts can be thought beyond the ‘washing machine’ of the usual binary oppositions. It is here that I believe the Larger Group can help us meet contemporary challenges.

A CRUCIBLE FOR CREATIVITY IS NECESSARY

When designing a building, the initial process of coping with competing needs, legislation, site constraints and dreams feels chaotic, but I have learnt that by staying with this inevitable muddle, something quite new emerges that has never been thought before – a new form. Every designer knows this. But to get there, means coping with a lot of tension, confusion and not knowing. The solution does not come from compromise but transformation.

In Paul Klee’s, *Conjuring Trick*, two figures appear to float in dialogue. Klee is exploring the relationship between opposites, portraying them in delicate, momentary balance as he tried to reconcile them. The whole is supported by the frame of their relationship represented by the deepening red to brown border around the edge of the painting.

Carl Jung referred to the ‘transcendent function’ or, the confrontation of two positions that generate a tension charged with energy that creates a living, third thing – not a logical still birth, but a movement out of suspension between the opposites, a living birth that leads to a new level of being, a new situation.

AN ARCHITECT’S VIEW

Early in the design process for a church in Pacific Palisades, California, the parishioners held very strong and apparently irreconcilable preferences: some wanted a ‘simple parish church’, ‘others wanted a noble, almost cathedral-like space’; ‘intimate seating in the half round but also a traditional sanctuary’; ‘connections to the outdoors through the plentiful use of glass but others, concerned about good acoustics for the new organ, argued for hard, heavy surfaces and no glass and so on.

The architects contained these differences to find a path to the unexpected and remarkable (2010, pp.10-12). In the final design seven rows of seating in a half ellipse created intimacy while a modified Latin cross roof provided a grand space. Hipped roofs, starting low at the eaves rose to a cruciform in the centre: a lofty space was formed inside while the church looks modest from the outside and easily slips into the surrounding neighbourhood.

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3 Carl G Jung quoted by Jeffery C Miller, *The Transcendent Function*, 2004, p 38
5 Moore Ruble Yudell (1983). *St. Matthew’s Parish Church*, Pacific Palisades, California
***** FROM ‘CHAOS’ TO CREATIVITY

The Larger Group follows a similar process. Given time and work, according to de Maré, a state of ‘Koinonia’ emerges; it is a recursive process, a dance that continues, forming and falling away in a constant circularity. In certain moments of possible coherence, new thinking emerges.

***** EMERGING COHERENCE

I imagine this emergence as a star forming in the universe. Dust swirls around and over trillions of years it forms into something more coherent – the star we see when we look up into the sky.

***** BECOMING A THINKER IN THE LARGE GROUP

Bion describes how an infant who does not have her experiences sufficiently comprehended by a concerned carer, is likely to experience ‘Nameless Dread’ and only able to express feelings and fantasies in a state of mindlessness. Participating in any Larger Group is likely to precipitate a similar state of mindlessness, especially when such feelings are not sufficiently acknowledged. It is often at these moments that the question, “What are we talking about?” emerges. As Bion says, it is only when we can tolerate the discomfort of not understanding, sort out the nature of the experiences, digest them mentally and give them meaning, that we can be a thinker not only as a container of feelings but also as a mind that holds thoughts sufficiently to engage in dialogue.

***** OPENS US UP TO OPPOSING FORCES

Although most of us wish to have a voice, to make a difference in the world, and to engage in dialogue, it is just at the moment of wanting to speak, ‘Nameless Dread’ tends to override our best intentions forcing us back into silent retreat.

It is here where we see that the difficulty of finding a voice in the Larger Group reflecting the difficulty of personally facing what is happening in our world. To cope, there is a tendency to look for familiar ways of making sense of the experience. Pat listed many defences to thinking, the most pervasive of which is the creation of various forms of an as-if two-person relationship to avoid the multiplicity of opinions in the group.

***** DIALOGUE

The concept of dialogue relies on the work of Martin Buber and his ‘philosophical-mystical poem’, I and Thou, in which he describes the importance of human beings relating to one another as subjects. Interestingly, Buber also makes an important distinction between two orders of association: community, the relationship between persons, and organisation, the connection between things.

According to de Maré, dialogue transcends words, conveying ideas and enabling exchange to take place (1991, p.68). He thought of it as the hallmark of humanity, an a-priori form of currency, a skill that has to be learnt like a language and necessary if humans are to survive human mismanagement in addition to nature (1991, p.64).
***** DIALOGUE IS A GOOD IDEA?

Despite almost universal agreement that dialogue is a good idea for others, not many people are personally willing to engage in it. The belief that ‘just talking’ achieves nothing is not unusual.

Richard Sennett, a philosopher much loved by architectural academics, suggests that a cultural shift in the balance between public and private life, that occurred during the nineteenth century along with capitalism and the death of religion, engendered a mistrust of dialogue.

***** SILENT SPECTATORSHIP REPLACED ROWDY PARTICIPATION

It was then that silent spectatorship replaced rowdy participation. This was reflected architecturally when the great opera houses were built.

Public encounters have increasingly become a matter of social obligation, where exchange with strangers is at best seen as formal, dry and phony, and at worst, are seen as threatening figures (1978, p. xvii). Meanwhile private life has become an end in itself to be protected and isolated from the harsh realities of the social world.  

Sennett also describes how middle-class audiences began to pride themselves in restraining their emotions to differentiate themselves from the working class. They were ‘respectable and respectful’ in contrast to the old ‘primitive’ spontaneity (1978, p.206-8).

So, for dialogue to have any chance, there needs to be an intention and belief that it is possible. In my experience this belief has to be held by the conductor/convenor.

***** LEARNING TO HATE AND STAY

Larger Groups are frustrating and inevitably engender hatred but this definitely does not mean expressing raw aggression!

“I have learned through bitter experience the one supreme lesson to conserve my anger, and as heat conserved is transmitted into energy, even so our anger controlled can be transmitted into a power that can move the world.” -Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948)

Pat talked a lot about the plague of mindlessness and the importance of learning to use the energy that could be expressed as hatred for thinking as a prerequisite for managing dialogue. In Greek, hate also means grief reminding us that this is tough stuff and takes some learning. As he suggests, “The question is how to foster a culture that enables thoughtfulness and creativity to transform hate into a more negotiable currency” (de Maré, 1991, p. 89) 7 It needs an alchemical vessel, both imaginal and physical, to contain the

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inevitable confusion and pain. By sticking with it, members will make a key discovery: they will notice that the 'climate' is changing, and it is their interventions that are changing it.

****** CONDUCTING OR CONVENING?

There is a discussion about whether to describe this role as conductor or convenor. I use the word conductor as I enjoy the allusion to making music. Musicians have different instruments, with different moods and colours and although there are notes in the score, the music is not automatic. An orchestra, the size of a larger group, works with the conductor for many hours with the intention of making music to draw the meaning out. I recently heard Simon Rattle being described as a man with big ears, able to hear every sound.

To establish dialogue, one also needs time, big ears and intention. Whoever takes this role, whether it be one person or a team, requires more than calling people together for a meeting. Most larger groups need to be supported to work together. It is this container function that needs careful attention to provide a context for facing current dreads. I remember convening a Large Group, at the time of the first Gulf War, and hearing people say afterwards, "At least I now know what I think".

****** A CRITICAL THEORY?

Just as both psychoanalysis and Marxism are critical theories concerned with discovering hidden power structures, so too is the Larger Group. From this standpoint, it becomes a unique place not only for providing the possibility of investigating ‘social reality’ but also for gaining ‘social knowledge’ about what that reality is.

Just now we are facing increasing fragmentation in our institutions. The Larger Group enables us to recognise this splitting and its destructive consequences and to think through new alternatives.

****** WHO RULES THE RULES?

It also gives us an opportunity to investigate the rules or assumptions that led to this fragmentation prevail. Such questions as, ‘Why is it that our Public Sector was divided into Purchasers and Providers?’ ‘What is value for money actually?’ ‘What is truth?’ ‘What is Fake News?’ can all be asked and in asking them we can begin to discover how our society shapes our thinking.

It is by putting our minds together in this way that emancipation becomes possible. Pat described two levels of emancipation: discovering a unique individual self, or ‘idio’, as in idiotic and idiosyncratic, and gaining ‘outsight’: this is into the culture rather than ‘insight’ into our intrapsychic processes.

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FOUCAULT’S DEEP STRUCTURES – HIDDEN POWER

Foucault suggested that without knowledge, there is no power. Interestingly he described two forms of power. One that is obvious, embodied in the law, consisting of prohibitions and taboos, “Thou shalt Not!” The second is less obvious, as it does not rely on punishment, but it is a more-subtle form of control and insidious. It relies on a technique of ‘normalization’ achieved by establishing binary oppositions where the implication is that there is an established norm that dominates the opposite that is then defined as a deviation.9

The question is how to retain freedom when official ideology celebrates one section of society while patronising another: private enterprise versus the state; men/women; rich/poor and so on. (Jones, 2015, p. xvii).10 Or, when knowledge is actively withheld from the agenda. Clive Irving, editor of the Daily Express in the fifties, noted the “Calculated aloofness that sustained the Royal Family at that time”. 11 I would suggest nothing has changed.

QUESTIONING THE ESTABLISHMENT PERSPECTIVE

As many writers have eloquently described, the establishment continue to set the rules. The question is, how is it that a whole society can be persuaded into believing that a prevailing ideology, one that protects the dominant class, is the only natural and normal way of thinking? It’s interesting to remember Richard Sennett’s observation about the way the middle class dominated the cultural mores of the nineteenth century, just by behaving in a particular way.

In a Larger Group I recently conducted, one person angrily exclaimed, “The rich have no barriers. They can move their money about at will. The poor have to negotiate barriers all the time just to earn money”. So clear and yet so simple.

THE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL?

Paying attention to events in the Larger Group allows us not only to recognize such hegemonies, but also to gain a margin of freedom from their grip. But the question is, do we really want that freedom?

Most of us do not want our world turned upside down and most of us choose to look for the light at the end of the tunnel. But, according to Žižek the light at the end of the tunnel might not be a sign of hope. It may just be the lights on a train about to run us over.

As he says, we in the West live in a self-enclosed ‘cupola’, an artificially climatized inner space, isolating us from violence in the rest of world. It determines everything and introduces a radical class division across the entire globe, separating those protected by the sphere from those outside its cover.

Can we dare to really know about the implications of discovering the hidden forces that drive our lives?

9 This is the hegemony of maintaining social power through the binary system of knowledge/classification; power/marginalisation; order/systematised control.
11 Princess Margaret Episode 2 BBC2, 2018.