

‘Those People Were Some Kind of Solution’: Can Society in any Sense Be Understood?¹

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Abstract

In a rapidly changing world, with boundaries of statehood, citizenship, influence and authority difficult to discern, attempting to interpret society is a necessary but uncertain enterprise. Using our diverse experience as heads of contemporary institutions, we explore the limitations of social interpretation, suggesting that those who are trying to make sense of society use their organizational and group memberships as organizing contexts while they listen to and negotiate the differing interpretations of others. Amid the pressure of conflicting roles and interpersonal projection, providing structured spaces that are free from interpretation may be crucial for individuals to locate themselves and claim their unique perspectives. Those who interpret society should be ready to notice their limitations.

In his poem ‘Waiting for the Barbarians’, the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy describes the people in a city waiting for the barbarians to come and take over. But the barbarians do not come, and the people return and indicate that there are no barbarians. The poem ends with one of the disappointed citizens saying what a tragedy this is, because ‘Those people were some kind of solution.’

Considering outsiders as ‘barbarians’ has always been an easy escape from grappling with the complexity of social process (Shapiro, 2003). Having an external barbarian suggests that death will come from outside the culture, from outside the self. The notion suggests an

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unconscious basic assumption fight-pair, where the shared fantasy is that extinction of one will result in salvation for the other. The illusion is that immortality – or unhindered progress – will result from destroying the barbarians. This fantasy deprives a culture of the deepening perspective derived from grappling with internal limitations.

Our topic – the interpretation of society – has become increasingly prominent in the group relations world, possibly because of a new-found maturity in the development of our thinking, or perhaps as a reaction to the general incompetence and problems in delegation that appear to dominate governments worldwide.

Making sense of the vast complexity of society is a daunting prospect. None the less, the task of locating ourselves in the larger world and negotiating shared views with others requires the effort. Many are engaged in this task, in particular some within the Tavistock tradition of group relations. We too – like Bion and others – have argued that it is possible to extrapolate from the individual to the group and from the group to society (Shapiro and Carr, 1991). But it is worth questioning whether there is a limit of intellectual activity beyond which speculation becomes so ungrounded, so filled with projection without reality testing, that it can be both stimulating and nonsense.

Moving into large scale social interpretation has significantly stretched group relations theory, which has generally been applied to institutions and organizations through consultation (Khaleelee and Miller, 1985; Carr, 1993). Today, we will consider whether it is possible to carry this kind of thinking to the mega institutions of human life, nations and governments, where responsibility belongs to citizens and their variously authorized leaders. And, if the beginnings of social interpretation are possible, what are its conditions and constraints?

In the ancient world, a familiar rhetorical beginning for an argument was to capture the listener's ear with a story before going on to criticize him. Here is ours. It's by a nine-year-old boy who was asked to write a piece on 'flying'.

I was at the cemetery looking at my dad's tombstone when my father rose up from his grave. He touched me on the forehead and with that my shoulder blades started to grow. I began to sprout wings! I was so transfixed that I fainted. When I woke up my father was carrying me up to the sky. I was so frightened that I might fall and die or he might drop me . . . ahhhhhhh. He did – I'm falling. Why has my father betrayed me! Wait a second, I'm not falling, I am flying! My father shouts to me, 'I gave you my gift and now I must go.' I yelled back, 'Wait!' But, it was too late. He had returned to his grave, never to awaken again. I felt so sad that he couldn't stay with me but I also knew that he had given me a wonderful gift. I was soaring above the

treetops like a colossal, proud eagle. The wind was blowing against my face like it does when I ride my bike really fast. As I flew through a cloud, the raindrops seemed like bugs hitting the car windshield. I wiped my face off and did the back flip I've been practicing so hard in the swimming pool. That was so much easier to do in the air!

I started to get hungry and I really didn't want to eat bird food so I headed back to land. When I touched the ground my wings disappeared! I soon discovered that that if I wanted to fly all I had to do was whisper 'Dad', and my wings would magically appear.

You may have guessed that the author of this story was Joshua Shapiro, my nine-year-old son, who was given the assignment in school. Moved by the story and feeling proud of his work, I reacted with warmth and praise. But, knowing that children need an interpretation-free space to develop their own ideas, I did not tell him what I made of his story. I thought to myself, 'Josh is a young boy with an older father. He is aware of his grandparents' recent deaths and the ravaging illness of my elder brother. He is reflecting on what he will be left with after I die.' My wife had a different interpretation, through both her professional role as a psychologist and her role of mother. She thought, 'Josh is writing about his use of his father to separate from his mother (earth), and thinking about what he has taken in from his dad that will allow him to fly on his own.' Founded in the marital and parental roles, these interpretations are complementary; each offers the other a reflection of their shared connection to their child.

I then sent the story to Wesley Carr, who wrote to Josh, telling him that he had used the story in a sermon at Westminster Abbey. Wesley's interpretation came as a theologian. Writing to me, he said, 'Joshua's questions resonate with some of the dilemmas of the Christian tradition. If Christ rose from the dead at the resurrection, where does he go then? St John says that Christ returns to the Father. What interests me is how Josh begins at the tomb, revels in the freedom of expression by flying, but then finds that any serious taking-off in life is only possible as long as he remembers the magic and symbolic word, 'Dad'. Josh recognizes that his father is a separate person and can die. But he also sees that his father can both be gone forever and invoked through his symbolic word. Any faith has to deal with the presence and absence of God at the same time. The capacity to locate the dead person in the mind is essential in handling bereavement; the loved one must be discovered as both present and absent. The strength of Josh's paper was that he understood the power of the internalized dead father.'

Here is one small text, with three widely divergent interpretations, each of which reflects the differing contexts each of us carries. The

interpreters share something in common; all three are embedded in a larger social structure. Our themes included: anxiety about loss, the use of 'the father' in managing separation, and the complexity and recognition of limits necessary for living and believing. These themes are at the same time divergent, linked, interesting, and insufficient.

As individuals, we join society and separate from it, feel its complexity and use our more familiar contexts to relate to it. But society is too vast to be used simply. Unlike psychology or theology, society is not a group or field that can be grasped. Each interpreter must begin with a more definable access point, and consider the complexity of his unique perspective in order to negotiate any shared interpretation with others that allows for recognition of the limits of interpretation and the missing pieces.

One of the more graspable contexts for an individual's interpretation of society is group membership. Each of us takes up membership in a number of groups. Their ideals and values permeate our thinking (Shapiro, 2005). Our commitment to group membership is both a behavioural interpretation of an aspect of society and an enactment of our relatedness to it.² The relationship is reciprocal; groups shape our understanding of society. Our various groups are significant contexts – often unconscious and covert – that form our interpretations of the world.

HISTORY OF TAVISTOCK INTERPRETIVE WORK

The two of us take up membership in psychoanalytic and group relations traditions, both of which affect our perceptions. Members of these traditions use notions of unconscious communication, delegation, irrational role assignment, and the ways these aspects of unconscious life are communicated through organizational task and the structures of authority relations.

Some of these ideas date back to Sigmund Freud who, at the end of his life, was so distressed by the way things were developing in Europe that he began to try to explain the origins of human society. Freud focused (1913, 1921, 1923, 1929) on the way the mind is shaped by generational trauma, suggesting, for instance, that traumatic social change in pre-historical society had left traces in the human unconscious, affecting group membership. He hypothesized the pre-historical band of brothers who internalized their guilt over their joint murder of the tribal father, suggesting that this was a central unconscious basis for the subsequent rules of society and the beginnings of civilization. Freud, too, considered the power of the internalized dead father.

The unfolding learning from psychoanalysis has illuminated some of the ways we maintain unconscious connection with each other and our past (both individual and collective) at all times. Freud and his followers illuminated how learning about these connections can be deepened through a particular role relationship and a negotiated task of understanding. 'Learning from experience' became a central link from psychoanalysis to group relations work, with 'experience' deliberately defined as including the life of the unconscious, both individual and collective. Making use of these insights led group-relations consultants to use the structure of their roles to study organizational dynamics. Through their authorized roles, consultants could reasonably assume that organizational representatives were trying – both consciously and unconsciously – to communicate so that the relevant issues could be grasped. This assumption allowed consultants to take up an interpretive stance, relying on their internal reactions to the process as data.

Since the Second World War, the Tavistock and associated organisations have developed group relations conferences and theory, with a high point reached in the 1960s. The intention that the study of groups should lead to political and social change had always been present in this work. Eric Trist (1985) noted, for instance, that while Bion was writing *Experiences in Groups*,

it became apparent that [he] was using the word 'group' to mean *interchangeably* the face-to-face group and the wider society. For him there was one 'socio-' and all 'socio-' had a 'psycho-'dimension and all 'psycho-' a 'socio-'dimension. (p. 33)

In group relations conferences, the large group often becomes the place where differences between members can be seen as differences between nations and nationalities. Staff discussions, focusing on individual members as representatives of whole cultures, often take place against a media background, which demands larger scale thinking if staff members are to locate their work in a larger context. But these formulations have limits, and conference staff do not often examine themselves and their external roles as relevant contexts for their perspectives. When these organizational roles become visible, we can see more clearly their powerful influence on our efforts to make sense of the larger world.

INTERPRETING FROM INSTITUTIONS

The two of us have had limited but fascinating opportunities to grasp elements of the larger society from our organizational roles. We have

learned about the powerful containment of the organizational context, and the clarifying lens opened on to the larger society by the organizational task. Given our experience, we wonder about the capacity of any of us to work interpretively without attending to these contexts and negotiating a shared meaning from a range of vantage points.

Our institutional tasks, roles, and focus intersect in complementary ways. As psychoanalyst and director of a psychoanalytic hospital, Shapiro attends to the individual and his or her relations to the family and the community. As Dean of Westminster, Carr focuses on the larger institutions of society and their use to others. Each of us uses an interpretive stance as a way of life; it informs our work. In addition to interpretive work within our institutions, each of us must make some assessment of the relevant boundaries in the larger world in order to help position our institutions within them. How do our institutions and their primary tasks relate to the larger society? How are we engaged with the outside? And, when we negotiate complex interpretations with others in other institutions, what learning does the outside world give back?

The Austen Riggs Center

The mission of the Austen Riggs Center is the treatment and study of the individual in context in order to help 'treatment resistant patients' become people taking charge of their lives. We treat patients who have not benefited from the more medical, cognitive, and behavioral short-term interventions that characterize contemporary psychiatric practice. Austen Riggs patients are those who have, as an aspect of their psychopathology, what psychiatrists call 'personality disorder'. In essence, this refers to the problematic ways they *are* as people – developed in interaction with their human environments. These are people who *bother* others, either through their self-destructive behaviours or through their manifestations of anger or depression. We are learning that these 'bothering' behaviours are unconscious communications that require an appropriate setting to decode. Our patients are delegates of their families, carrying information about their generational past. Staff and patients have developed a setting for such translation at the Austen Riggs Center over the past eighty-five years, and are now seeing the ways in which generational trauma is transmitted non-verbally through family and social interaction and encoded into personality. Our ongoing effort is to help translate disturbing actions into language so that our patients can be better understood, recognize their impact on others, and place their painful life experiences – both current and past – in historical and sometimes generational perspective.

Our therapeutic community of examined living requires us all to attempt to translate behaviour and interaction into language – within the staff group, the patient group, and between the two groups. Shifting from ‘treatment-resistant patients’ to ‘people taking charge of their lives’ requires all of us, to the extent possible, to take responsibility for our own projections, stay in role, yet be available to others as we attempt to make sense of our collective institutional life. What keeps us relatively secure in the midst of this intensive interpretive effort is a shared tradition and a series of protected ‘interpretation-free zones’, where there is an agreed-upon break from scrutiny and an opportunity to just be together. This space for *freedom from interpretation* is crucial in allowing life to proceed without relentless – and often intrusive – scrutiny of oneself and others.

We all bother one another in various ways. As Sartre (1948) noted, ‘Hell is other people’. We learn to protect ourselves from being bothered by developing ways of not attending, not listening, not reacting. These defences are also manifestations of how our personalities have been shaped by our human environments, and they, too, are communications that require an appropriate environment to be decoded. We have learned to take this seriously by attempting to take up an interpretive stance as a whole community: listening to how the other is right, filtering our experience through the framework of our roles, and negotiating a shared reality that begins to make sense. In this context, the communicative aspect of behaviour becomes visible, and both patients and staff can begin to place their developmental experience in perspective, seeing their own responsibility for repeated behavioural enactments.

We have also found that our organization is a significant place to stand as we begin to make sense of aspects of the larger society. It gives us a lens, a tradition, and mission-related authority, so that we can work with others in related organizations to negotiate a shared view of the relevant aspects of the larger society. This respectful negotiation protects any one of us from claiming certainty about our perceptions of the outside world.

The approach distinguishes the Austen Riggs Center from the majority of other psychiatric hospitals; our relative uniqueness requires an effort on our part to discover those aspects of the larger world that link to our work. To discern this, we increasingly focus our mission so that others can recognize us. With this focus, we can explore the perceptions of Riggs coming from others and begin to invite people from other disciplines to talk with us about the interface between our work and theirs. We increasingly see and engage the outside world through the lens of our mission: the psychodynamic

treatment and study of the individual in context. This has led us to develop the Riggs' Erikson Institute for Education and Research as a structure for reaching outside and a way to hold our mission's application beyond our walls. While this is not an institution aimed at understanding society – its task is treatment – we can use our primary task to have a perspective on the outer world.

Let me give you an example. We organize our work at Riggs around a community of examined living and give educational conferences for clinicians on that theme. Out of one of these conferences came a request from a local college to host a meeting of college counselling centres. They were noticing that a large proportion of their entering students were taking psychoactive medication, insisting that the counselling centres continue providing it. Moreover, students were requesting these medications for normal developmental experiences: failed love relations, examination anxiety, and the like. Counselling centre staff members sensed that the students' turn to medication and drugs was adversely affecting their colleges' mission of learning, by substituting *managing* life for *learning* from it. Riggs seemed to them like an appropriate place outside of the counselling centre world to take up 'convening authority' – and a focused identity – to bring the colleges together. They recognized Riggs' expertise about psychoactive medication and the way the excessive use of medication can affect learning about life.

In response to our invitation, a dozen colleges and universities sent representatives. We designed a retreat, enlisted counselling staff in presenting their experiences, and consulted to them from our position as members of a 'community of examined living'. Gradually, through four annual meetings, counselling centre staff began to realize that they were taking up a particular kind of work on behalf of the larger educational system. Some had previously imagined that they had been doing a kind of private practice, disconnected from the larger institution, until they began to see more clearly in our discussions that the private practice mind-set was a defensive structure. This allowed them to begin to discern the pressures coming at them from both the university and the larger society that were mandating against treatment and towards management.

Out of these discussions came the following negotiated interpretation about child-rearing in American society.

Over half of American marriages end in divorce, resulting in less social and psychological containment for children. Society has developed psychopharmacological containment instead. When children go off to college, many have not developed sufficient emotional maturity in their families to

manage the separation, and the family is less available to them because of its fragmentation. Parents, guilty about not taking good enough care of their children, expect the colleges to continue a parental role, and they hold the college accountable. But colleges, fearful of litigation and trying to recover their primary task of education, have moved away from the parental role. They now provide even less containment than formerly, with co-ed dormitories, no on-site adult supervision, and few restrictions. Colleges then enact the conflict by both turning to their college health services to provide parenting and decreasing the financial resources to support it. So, for example, college health services used to be a place where students could sleep overnight if they were excessively intoxicated. Some colleges have cut finances so that such services are no longer available. As a consequence, if a student is intoxicated, it becomes a matter for the police. The police then take over developmental containment in place of families and educational institutions. This sequence has implications for the development of citizens and for democracy.

This complex interpretation emerged from discussions across institutional and role boundaries carried out by people from different organizations with related tasks and grounded in cross-validating interpretations. Recognizing that in this limited interpretive effort we had not attended to crucial input from families, students, police, and other stakeholders in these social dilemmas, we have brought our initial collaborative view of this aspect of the larger society back into our institutions for further work, since the issues raised seemed congruent to the tasks of all.

Westminster Abbey

It would be difficult to imagine anywhere more different from Austen Riggs than Westminster Abbey. One has recently celebrated eighty-five years of existence; the other at least a thousand and probably more; a small hospital set in glorious countryside with a close group of staff and patients in rural Massachusetts, compared with a city tourist attraction with more than a million visitors a year. One is a unique enterprise established on the basis of psychoanalysis, with its intimacy, the other a public building in which 1000 attending feels a small congregation; one lives by medical and residential fees, the other by entrance charges, voluntary giving, some commercial activity and a small investment portfolio, with no subsidy from church, parliament, or crown.

The Abbey's statement of intent (known otherwise as mission statement) is simple. It was drawn up in a few minutes' Chapter meeting and reads as follows:

To serve Almighty God as a school of the Lord's service by offering divine worship daily and publicly.

To serve the Sovereign by daily prayer and by a ready response to requests made by Her or on Her behalf.

To serve the nation by fostering the place of true religion within national life, maintaining a close relationship with members of the House of Commons and the House of Lords and with others in representative positions.

To serve pilgrims and all other visitors and maintain the tradition of hospitality.

Unlike Riggs's individual focus, clergy at the Abbey have at most fleeting contact with any individual, and a strange ambiguity emerges. The congregation is experienced as a crowd of individuals with little or no personal connectedness and at the same time it is a unitary whole. For example, it is reckoned that about three billion people watched Princess Diana's funeral. In the mind of the officiants the service was designed to enable everyone, from all classes of society, to participate.

Westminster Abbey is not a normal church with the customary activities beyond worship; it is known as a Royal peculiar. It is one of only three, the others being St James Palace and St George's, Windsor. Roughly speaking, St James ministers to the staff and people of the Royal palaces; St George functions in the more domestic setting of Windsor Castle, and Westminster Abbey is more for the state occasion.

The Abbey stands at the heart of the British establishment. It is just across the way from the Houses of Parliament and a short distance from Buckingham Palace and Downing Street. Once it was a great abbey within the Benedictine tradition. For various reasons, it was set under the jurisdiction of the Pope and not the Archbishop of Canterbury. When the reformation reduced and then displaced papal authority, the Abbey was in limbo. For a short period it became the Cathedral of the short-lived Diocese of Westminster. Queen Elizabeth rapidly saw that the alliance of church and parliament could become too powerful, so she claimed the Abbey as her own and it became a Royal peculiar – 'Royal' as in the gift of the monarch; 'peculiar', referring to statutes specific to the Abbey. Such an anomaly is significant. By removing a level of jurisdiction (that of bishops) and leaving the equivalent person (the Dean) within the Abbey in a unique relationship with the canons, the Queen created the prospect of creative work. In essence, the Dean and Queen are in a pair, with an opening made available for creative engagement with the task of the church. At Westminster, the Dean has particular authority and certain powers, which cannot be delegated to colleagues. There is, therefore, a tension

between the two roles of the Dean: member of the corporate body (the Dean and Chapter) and Dean of Westminster. For example, until 1901 the City of Westminster was actually governed by the Dean of Westminster, the High Steward, and the High Bailiff.

Westminster Abbey is a place of religion in the broadest sense. Thousands of people each year take the opportunity to worship, yet the Abbey has no specific congregation apart from a handful of regular attendees. Most people who worship in the Abbey are drawn into its vast historical and liturgical context. I recently met an American visitor who asked whether Queen Elizabeth was married at the Abbey. Without hesitation I replied that she had never been married but died the virgin Queen and was buried in the east end of the Abbey. It dawned on me when the visitor looked bewildered, that he meant the only Queen Elizabeth he knew (the present Queen Elizabeth), while I work daily with documents dating from 1560 and earlier from an institution which even then was old! Was my response one of simple confusion, or was I, in my role, imbedded so firmly in the original authorization of that role that I lost perspective? Such role-related questions open a view into an interpretive stance.

Because of this complex context and its powerful sense of institution, the Abbey stands for the way the individual is linked to the larger context. All the major monotheistic religions emphasize how the self is inextricably linked to the larger collective of humanity, resisting any excessive emphasis on the individual and the more contemporary focus on spirituality, where the context is the self.

Something disturbing can happen when religious activity deviates from its institutional dimensions and its wider corporate and social roots. An example occurred in Sheffield, in the context of a highly structured and customarily stable church – the Church of England – and not on the fringes of charismatic religion.

Crookes is an attractive Sheffield suburb. The population is a mix of university staff, professional people, and students. The parish church of St Thomas stands within the evangelical tradition with an emphasis on personal conversion and participatory worship. The new curate (a young minister in training) was Christopher Brain. Because of his intelligence, youth, and charisma, bishops did not bother to require the usual procedures of selection and examination. Ordination, customarily decided by the bishop with consultation, was a foregone conclusion. Brain was designated because of his believed empathy with young people. The Church, like any other institution that thinks of the future, over-values youth. Brain began his ministry with a small multimedia event; and the congregation rapidly grew. The service was held at nine o'clock in the evening and became popular with young people.

Even church leaders endorsed it with their presence. Its success in drawing crowds called for a larger church. Church authorities applied a legal nicety to acquire a building in the centre of the city. The multimedia worship became more elaborate, with a New Age mix of ecology and spirit. The Archbishop of Canterbury endorsed this modern approach to young people without even seeing it. Everywhere Christopher Brain went he was feted and excused the normal training required for clergy. He was set apart as an individual from the church, without anyone noticing. Though not Royal, this unusual pair of the minister and the church was also a kind of 'peculiar', but missing a working connection with the church's corporate functioning.

Soon, the bubble burst, with situations involving money, sex, and manipulation. Counsellors went in force to help the damaged people. But the real problem was the collective failure of all in authority to exercise it – archbishop, bishop, archdeacon, vicar, theological college, and in-service training officer. It is not that they did not act: they acted, but failed to locate Christopher Brain in the context of the larger church institution. In other words, their roles and awareness of them did not function because they did not see that the limiting but grounding connections between their institutional mission and the more secular and seductive social context of this situation had somehow to be included in any interpretation about what was actually happening.

This example illuminates the dangers of easy interpretation without attending to the context. The church readily paired with this young minister in its eagerness to join the passions of the young. But, in my view, it did not attend sufficiently to its unique context, to the 'internalized dead father', to the connection of the church with its own tradition. Had it done so, it might have been able to incorporate the perspective the young minister carried, while linking it and him more fully to the larger mission of the church. As I considered this interpretation, I had to notice that my view of these events was inevitably shaped by my position at Westminster Abbey and my imminent retirement from the role. Was I particularly sensitive in my role to the opportunities and dangers of pairing? Did my age and transition skew my perceptions of the attractiveness of the young and new ideas? All of these considerations and more would inevitably enter into a more negotiated view of such a situation and an interpretation of its larger meaning. What allowed the Church to get lost in this particular way? What forces was it contending with? To address these questions – which lead to considering the future connection of the Church with the next generation – would require input from a wide range of sources.

INTERPRETATION-FREE ZONE

Once we recognize that the 'barbarians' are not just outside the walls – and tolerate the depressive recognition that death is an intrinsic aspect of all of us – we can begin to think about the limitations of what we might actually grasp as individuals. If we then consider the escalating pressures on us, beginning with the intimate very small group of the family from which we have to differentiate, and add the forces coming from our group and organizational memberships and the chaotic pressures of the larger society that push against our having any reliable boundary at all, we can see how hard it is for any of us to find a space to think.

Wesley Carr first used the term 'interpretation-free zone' during a consultation offered to Ed Shapiro's adolescent and family unit at McLean Hospital (Shapiro and Carr, 1987). The programme was based upon intense psychotherapy and group work. Every person was involved, whatever their position, and most were becoming oppressed by the work. On the one hand they believed in the program and enjoyed its pioneering atmosphere. On the other hand they all felt that their private lives were not sacrosanct. Anything might come out at any time and it would be vigorously interpreted in relation to organizational dynamics and the clinical work. What was happening was that the transition from the life in a Group Relations conference was being made to the workday life of a treatment unit with scarcely any intermediate process of translation.

In a group relations conference there is structured time and enough containment to live a relentless, dynamically demanding and rewarding life. It is a learning situation deliberately set up. The boundaries are drawn and, so long as they are held, people can do anything. But this is manifestly not the case in real life. Not that these conferences do not represent real life; their intensity and brevity make it a specific experience rather than the generality of everyday living.

Even in group relations conferences it may be possible to have an interpretation-free zone, when individuals hide their process from the group. That does not mean that the person is not interpretable by others, but that the withdrawn individual or sub-group, while remaining part of the dynamic, is not joining in the effort to see it. Some kind of interpretation-free zone – dynamically significant for the system because it authorizes a space for privacy – is inevitably developed for the purpose of holding on to perspective and the boundaries of the self.

THE WORK OF OPUS

One of the efforts of OPUS is to bring people together to consider what

is happening in the larger society. From the perspective of the ideas we are developing in this paper, we would suggest that gathering a group of self-selected individuals as listening posts for the purpose of social study may be vulnerable. For what is for many people an 'interpretation-free zone' – namely, their everyday life, political, social and personal – is turned into a paradigm from which to interpret larger movements in society. The listening post is designed as such a place, but the self-authorized membership is not moved into place by limiting and defining organizational tasks and roles nor by any authorization to include differentiation and discontinuity. Such a group, while inevitably interesting and stimulating, runs the risk of being exploited by individuals. This is a phenomenon we recognize from our conference experience. It is possible for people who often believe that they know more to contribute in an esoteric fashion to a discussion and for that presume to attain a state of wisdom. But it is not wisdom we are seeking with this sort of interpretation: it is to find a way of life that might be meaningful for a large number of people – even the 'barbarians'(!) – who have both different roles and different approaches to the same data.

We wonder whether individuals might discover a different focus in listening post discussions if they had more formally authorized roles as representatives of their institutions. Rather than attempting to locate the complex and poorly negotiated role of citizen, individuals might be able to use representative roles on behalf of their institutions as a more graspable intermediate zone between individual and society, focusing on mission as a crucial link to the outside world. Listening posts, functioning as groups of institutional representatives, might then be able to create inter-group events to study connections between organizations that can deepen the understanding of crucial issues in the unfolding process of the larger society.

The need for focused attention to the contexts and roles represented by individuals and to the need for an interpretation-free zone raises questions about how we can locate ourselves in the dynamic process of which we are part in order to establish sufficient ground for an interpretation of our own. And why do it anyway? Is it worth the effort? From our diverse experience in our institutions, we would both respond 'Yes!', but with caution. The answer must be, we suppose, if you wish to fly (as Joshua Shapiro puts it), then you need a launching pad that is relatively free from external interpretive pressure. With this freedom comes the possibility of experiencing both independence from and dependence on a tradition, which Joshua draws attention to in his remarks about losing his father and yet finding him every time he says the magic word, 'Dad'.

In a chaotic, rapidly changing society, where limited contact contributes to increased use of interpretative projection into others, holding to one's negotiated and delegated roles and contexts can be usefully grounding, and an interpretation-free space for reorientation becomes essential. We see this in both of our organizations. At Austen Riggs, the aim of the open setting is to keep patients in the external social environment as they undergo the process of intensive psychotherapy. The Riggs community calls its collective work 'examined living', but all worry from time to time whether too much of the 'examination' can interfere with the living! To the patients, curiously enough, life in the outside world may partly be the interpretation-free zone that they are seeking. With a social space that is free from clinically interpretive pressure, individuals can experiment without self-consciousness. This allows them a creative freedom. That is not to say that, from time to time, such a free space will not be interpreted; it just means that the therapists and the patients recognize that there are areas which – at least for the time being – are interpretation-free. As the interpretive work of therapy becomes more self-assured, staff and patients can open up more to the world in which they are set, as in Riggs's staff's engagement with the college counsellors.

Similarly, in the Abbey it could be argued that the point of worship, especially in an environment with less sense of congregational unity and more links to the process of worship through the ages, can create an interpretation-free zone. For example, the Creed may be said at every service, but it does not mean that everyone there believes it. Each stands in some relation to it, and some say it on behalf of others. So, for example, one person can state, 'I believe in God' with conviction, while having difficulty with the 'resurrection of the body'. Another, more rarely, might feel unsure about God but pretty clear about the resurrection of the body. The corporate life of the church suggests that, somewhere, someone is believing on behalf of others. When I am doubtful about God, someone else carries that notion until I can reorientate myself. That assumed space may be a dynamic interpretation-free zone. In order to get from my lack of belief to the belief of others, I may need to affirm a membership free of interpretation. Thus, I will not be asked to articulate what I understand about God. I will simply be asked to say that I believe in God and that is sufficient for me to be able to bring together life and belief, emotion and interpretation. It gives a perspective from which to inspect and consider the data of everyday life.

We are struggling still and will continue to do so, probably for our lifetime, with the legacy of Freud and others who declared that some sense might be made of society. It may be that the attempt to

understand society is a defence against the experience of despair about the world, a grandiose effort to manage the unmanageable. But some effort to make sense of the ungraspable by using our more familiar contexts as holding places may none the less be essential for psychological survival. While we know from our own experience and study that our efforts are not necessarily that brilliant or original, what is original is the way we come to them and how we use them. As we have indicated, both of us in our very different institutions have found that this way of thinking has clarified our work with others. And that surely is the test for all of us: whether we can work in our differing roles, making as conscious as possible the small and large contexts we each represent, and using our own particular approach based on group relations without invoking it all the time.

Crucial is whether we can work with others in such a way that they are led on to something new and original without really knowing why. Rather than considering those who don't speak our language as barbarians, we may be able to find ways to discover their participation in a common enterprise. We both have the experience – at the Abbey and at Riggs – that we can use Bion's (1961) hypotheses and approaches as a way of understanding, but we do not have to require others to understand them in order to share perspectives with them.

Note

1. OPUS meeting, London, November, 2005 – Plenary Presentation.
2. James Krantz, personal communication

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