

Clearing the enigma.
Or, The sphinx, a group and place.
Part one of three parts
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'It never departs from its own character; since it is always receiving all things ...by nature it is there as a matrix for everything, changed and diversified by the things that enter it'.
Timaeus - on Chora. Plato

'Space, then, is what must be there in the beginning, even before the act of creation occurs'
Edward Casey

Introduction.

I put to you tentatively, three factors, which may play in the mind of a group.

1. The matter of place as a pre existing condition for anything creative to come into being in group procedures. I suggest that, although lethargic or destructive procedures so often emerge, the satisfying goal for humans is to be productive, erotic and creative enough of the time to make a life worth living.

In order to get to the primal (perhaps universal) significance of place in human affairs I draw on an early greek notion of *chora* as *receptacle of becoming* along with similar senses of containment in place in indigenous desert Australia, old Iraq and India.

2. The second factor is the task of a facilitator in group work to be attentive to finding and clearing enigmas in the sub liminal matrix of the group. I suggest that alertness to enigma is an elegant and energy saving procedure.

3. The third is attention to the elusive matter of the emergence of a 'tutelary spirit' whose appearance in a group process deepens the drama, reveals truths, confronts tyrannical procedures in a group and, in the end, may help resolve an emergent enigma.

These three reference points, may offer a creative and enjoyable experience of working in groups, even in the troubled terrain of inter racial intercultural groupings, or professional groups on the edges of desperation

Part 1. On the form of primal space - defined as *Chora* -

You may have contemplated interactive patterns of brain process as a representation of group process. You may have considered interactive associative and inhibitory functioning in group process as a mirror of brain interactive linkings. Specific functional regions in the brain processes might suggest a model of group behaviours.

Before this gets too complicated let us begin with a simple idea from Plato. In *Timaeus* in a few beautifully suggestive phrases Plato introduces the mystery and significance of a place in the mind where things begin. Without that place, that matrix, he suggests, nothing can come into being.

It is here, in the dialogue with Timaeus and Socrates that Plato develops his notion of original forms - the notion that somewhere, somehow in the structure of the universe there is 'an intelligible and unchanging model' and also simultaneously 'a visible and changing copy of it.' The intelligible and unchanging may be thought of as an inherent implicit structure of creation - physical and psychological- which, in a sense, pre exists or maybe predetermines the variations of the myriad individualised 'copies' or variations which are ourselves. We might think of human brain structure as being the original 'unchanging' model and the way your or my individualised associative linkings and inhibitions behave as the visible and changing 'copy' in (infinite) variation.

All well and good- this is the conventional notion of Platonic forms which feeds, like a head water spring, the notions of original archetypal patterns in nature and human behaviour- but in *Timaeus*, Plato takes it one more step to a third idea- that is the idea of a place or space (in the mind) without which nothing happens.

Plato has his character Timaeus say- 'We did not distinguish a third form, considering two would be enough; but now the argument compels us to try to describe in words a form that is difficult and obscure. What must we suppose its powers and nature to be? In general terms it is the receptacle and, as it were, the nurse of all becoming and change...' Timaeus section 16.

Timaeus precedes his further description of the 'nurse of becoming and change' with an investigation into the nature and quality of fire, air, water earth, as fundamental elements. By the time he gets to section 20, Timaeus/Plato has configured the 'receptacle' as 'space', that is - he says 'space which is eternal and indestructible, which provides a position for everything that comes to be and which

is apprehended without the senses by a sort of spurious reasoning and so is hard to believe in - we look at it indeed in a kind of dream and say that everything that exists must be somewhere and occupy some space, and say that what is nowhere in heaven and earth is nothing at all. And because of this dream state we are not awake to the distinctions we have drawn... and fail to state the truth about the true and unsleeping reality; namely that whereas an image, the terms of whose existence are outside its control in that it is always a moving shadow of something else, needs to come into existence in something else if it is to claim some degree of reality, or else be nothing at all... Timaeus section 20. (my underlining)

The philosophical Greek is here recognising in his own way the necessary function of this receptacle- which in his original Greek is referred to as *chora* - the space which must exist and be held in place order for things to come into being.

Before this notion gets too cosmic we might note that the practice of psychotherapy is exactly that. It is a *chora* job. The good- enough psychotherapist is the person who is capable of holding and sustaining a 'space' between two or more persons while some image from 'unsleeping reality' comes into being. The therapist's facilitative job, whether in company with an individual or in a group is, very simply, to be a custodian of the *chora*. In order to handle that job the therapist's daily discipline is to practise being 'the receptacle and nurse of becoming'. A good enough training in transference dynamics might be expected to teach one to acquire the necessary skills of being in negotiation with true and unsleeping reality as it projects images and moving shadows, seeking a receiver, a listener. A receptacle.

This seminal idea of the primal matrix and the custodianship of it's known but, shall we say, invisible existence, is taken up by Edward Casey, and by Australian philosopher of place, Freya Mathews. These three philosophers are concerned with the ground of being. They can help us think about what we do with place and place in mind and place in group. In his book, 'The Fate of Place', Edward Casey gives an intriguing summary of myths of the originating matrix. He recounts myththoughts which describe or explain different cultural forms of the 'ground of being' and the 'ground of becoming'. For instance, an ancient Sumerian (Iraqi) notion has the world being formed out of the matrix of a vast female being (Tiamat), who is later dismembered, her elements forming part of the created world. In this cultural genealogy it is the woman or primal mother who is cut to bits and out of whose bits the known world is made, or from whose particles the world sprouts. Subliminally this notion of the dismembered and diffused or sewn and harvested female may hover for thousands of years in the background of a culture - repeating into the present as a sort of known and unknown myth thought.

Ancient Hindu culture has a similar notion in the dismemberment of a vast, not female but male form, Purusha. This notion is taken up in the concept of the Avatar of preservation and protection, Vishnu, whose ten re-incarnations take care of the cosmos. Rama and Krishna are two of the Vishnu returns. That is to say, the dismembered male is known to trustworthily return to hold things or put things

back together. Plato in a less anthropomorphic mode concentrates upon the notion of 'Chora'- though *chora* as nursing space and receptacle of becoming may be derived from a female pattern.

The thing to concentrate upon here is a concept of a primal space as the precondition to creation - the necessary original space as the region from which all things can then emerge, develop and are ordered - once creation procedures begin.

In *Timaeus* this original condition is configured poetically as *chora* and translated as 'receptacle of becoming' or 'nurse of becoming'. This image may have some metaphorical relations to the hand held winnowing basket used in primitive agricultural societies to sort seeds and grain from the husks. The winnowing basket, so it seems, figured in the Eleusinian mysteries of Demeter, possibly as a symbolic presentation to initiates of the web, matrix or basketwork which holds all life, that is to say, the *chora*.

These notions of primal or original space gives some background to the notion familiar to group therapists, (derived from Foulkes), of an implicit 'ground of being' as felt and maintained in group process. A group may never really form if there is no sense shared in the group of there being a potential or actual *chora*, a 'ground of becoming' from which the group process can develop. As a group takes shape between people and in the mind of an individual we might note the presence of various 'grounds of being' forming in the assumptions of the group members. The notion of a collective or group *chora* or ground of being may be a necessary illusion to get things started.

It might be worth noting the felt presence or felt absence of *chora* as a 'basic assumption'. Bion and Foulkes may have been playing with this idea when they put forward notions about the church, the army and other institutions as commonly held culturally supported feelings for the matrices as fundamental or as basic assumptions in the groups which they worked with in an England suffering from war and suffering from the failure of the matrices of church, army, class, workplace and society. The failure, that is, of the conventional social matrix to support the individual in those tough times circa WW2. Nowadays we are more accustomed to the failure of the institutions and social matrices and may look for the grounds of being in other locations.

I am trying to go deeper than convention by noting the primal creation myths evoked or relied upon as implicit in the formation of any group, and perhaps diversely held by individual members. It is worth thinking about the internally held sense of an original space out of which the group's members proceed and imagine. Put another way, if there is no sense of *chora* (primary containing matrix) secured in a group there may only be primal pre creative anxiety or pre destructive fear at a loose end. Anxiety and fear have nowhere to settle if there is no sense of a primal matrix (a winnowing basket) in a group into which seeds of fears and anxiety can be placed and sorted.

I am speaking about our personal senses, unconsciously held, of the existence or non existence of a primal matrix of being and most especially the 'receptacle or nurse of becoming'. *Chora*.

With this Platonic idea in mind it may be possible to consider how different sorts of groups work with the *chora*, that is- work with the (subliminal) sensation that there is or is not a shared space in the group which will allow or enable things from the 'unsleeping reality' to come into being.

I imagine that the sense of *chora* (primal matrix of becoming) will be different in a therapy group depending upon what the traumatic history of the members might be and the stated therapeutic task. I imagine that the *chora* will be slightly different if the group is a study group, a learning group or a professional group. I imagine that a professional group of psychotherapists or a training group of psychotherapists will constellate a *chora* of a very specific kind. It would be a mistake to conflate the *chora* (primal receptacle) required for a therapy group with the latent *chora* of a group of psychotherapists in training. This idea requires careful examination.

In psychotherapy professional groups, for instance, it might be worth tracking how assumptions arise about what is considered to be the preferred or culturally elected basic creation matrix which operates within that professional group. Basic assumptions may be tenderly or tenaciously held in a core group of therapists. Members find themselves advocating for recognition of a ground of being which is felt to be essential and felt to be internally held or ratified by each individual. It may come as a surprise to discover that the notion (archetypal idea) of a common and binding *chora* is held by all, but the form or manifestation of that notional matrix is not at all held consensually. Indeed differing myth thoughts about what an authentic primal matrix feels like may be the big problem for such a group when something challenges the members to go deeper into the space of primal becoming.

When there is subliminal confusion in the basic assumptions about the shape or location of the 'space for becoming' then a group may be in trouble. There may be deep conflict or confusion in the myththoughts of the group. If we follow Casey's review of archetypal myth forms of original matrix, it may be possible however to sort through the confusions by reference to some of the more likely (pre-existing) patterns. This needs study.

In a professional group the existence and maintenance of a training reveals individual assumptions of what holds a professional group in its place. The enigmatic fight for control of the training reveals basic assumptions. Tracked deeply the anxiety about control of the training may be anxiety about the existence or reality of the matrix of becoming- whether there is in fact anything sustaining the world other than ones' own control of it.

I have in mind those groups which have stated productive purpose; professional

groups of therapists in particular, which in general begin with an assumption that they are joined together by a common purpose of healing, benevolence or productivity. It takes work however to keep the *chora* (the winnowing basket) of such a group intact. This is perhaps different work to groups which are brought together by bad happenings, that is, by illness or by traumatic histories- though here too the recovery, significance and sustainment of the 'ground of being' is fundamental to ongoing human life.

The shattered human may be a human whose primal matrix of being and becoming has been shattered by disaster , by war , by abuse or mental insult. The therapeutic human may be the human who offers a more or less intact ground of being and becoming to the person whose primal matrix, village, city, country, place or place in the mind, is in disintegration. This theme of original matrix may seem abstruse but I am stating it as formative or pre formative idea in the next matter to place before us - that is- working with enigma in group activity.

I suggest that people who work with and in groups might consider very seriously the psychological and philosophical grounding which underlies the forming of a group. Failures or disintegrations in holding the ground of becoming (in the *chora*) may lead to failures or disintegrations of a group. Plato puts it very nicely- if there is no space into which things can come into being then nothing happens at all. As Plato has Timaeus say -

' Space which is eternal and indestructible which provides a position for everything that comes to be...' but this space about which he speaks is not material space – not a sensate space, exactly, but may be what we would call a psychological space which allows moving shadows of something else, images from some unsleeping reality to come into existence. (end part 1.)