

THEY'VE STARTED DROPPING BOMBS! A Boys' Group Confronts War

This narrative tells about my work with a group of adolescent boys. It describes in particular, the boys and my experience during the first bombing of Iraq, January 16, 1991.

by Andrew Malekoff

Andrew Malekoff, ACSW is Director of Program Development, North Shore Child and Family Guidance Center, Roslyn Heights, New York, and Co-Editor of *Social Work with Groups*.



When one thinks of events that define a generation, tragedies such as the assassination of President John F. Kennedy come to mind. Everyone seems to remember where they were when they heard. My memories of sitting in seventh grade English class at age twelve and a half, are as vivid as my current memory of working with a boys' group when the news came of the bombing of Iraq.

The group consisted of boys in their early teens that were referred to the North Shore Child and Family Guidance Center (NSCFGC) following some impulsive, destructive and or antisocial act. The tentative purpose for the group was to help the boys become more reflective and less reactive, that is, to put space between impulse and action.

The group provided a context in which concerns could be explored in the abstract and enacted in the present, the hear-and-now of the group.

As with all clinical groups at NSCFGC the members are assigned to a group by an agency clinical team following an intake evaluation. My preference is to first schedule a family meeting with each prospective member and his parents. This gives us a chance to meet, talk

about the recommendation, explore what happens in a group, and how it can be helpful. By meeting parents right from the start a working alliance can be initiated, and ground rules for privacy, confidentiality and collaboration can be discussed.

In the family meeting I reserve some time to meet alone with the prospective group member, allowing for the expression of any questions or comments that may be more comfortably addressed privately. The private time serves symbolically as a transition from the family to the peer group.

In this particular group, three of the boys (Jack, Kenny and Matthew) had been together for about a year when a fourth member (Rick) joined the group. Jack was referred to the group by a caseworker who reported an escalating pattern of violent behavior most often targeted at peers after the sudden death of his father. His relationships with the school's authorities had also deteriorated significantly in recent years. The school's response was to label Jack as emotionally disturbed (ED) and farm him out to a special district subsidized school in a geographic location outside his home district. This response to troubled children occurs all too

frequently. Parents are not always able to advocate effectively and are often intimidated by those in authority or with access to confusing and "expert" information. Jack and his mom agreed that his behavior had deteriorated appreciably after his father's recent death. I expected, prior to our first contact, to be confronted with a surly and resistant young guy. To my surprise Jack was an articulate and thoughtful boy who expressed his anger openly and seemed hungry for the kind of relationships that the group might provide. I discovered that his violent attacks were retaliatory, aimed at the few who dared make a joke of his father's death. But I also learned about the unprovoked attacks such as grabbing a seated classmate's hair from behind and slamming his face into a desk. I wondered whether or not Jack might be a danger to the other group members and whether he had developed any other outlets for his rage. He assured me that he would control himself in the group and I believed him. He did have other outlets but I would not learn about them until sometime later.

Kenny came in for the first time with his adoptive father. He also had experienced loss, repeatedly, and at a much earlier age than had Jack. In our first meeting Kenny played with a hand held video game despite his father's pleas to "put the game away." Kenny was happy to hear that the group in addition to discussion would include

having fun and eating snacks. His dad unprepared for his son's pre-adolescent behavior — the growing rebellion. He was even more unprepared for the coming force of the repressed memories of early years of neglect and abuse which were beginning to leak through Kenny's poorly constructed armor. I wanted his dad to know that he and I were going to be partners in helping Kenny.

Matthew and his mother were clearly the most resistant of all the members to the idea of a group. They were certain that his problems required something more "intensive." Their doubt about the group reminded me of how I'm endlessly defending the value of group work to parents and colleagues. I know of no other modality that draws such universal skepticism. I think it may have something to do with the sounds and action that kids' groups generate. For some reason this seems antithetical to people's perceptions about the clinical experience. It appears neither as a "medical model" nor sufficiently controlled. The underlying question is, how can laughter and fun be part of the healing process when serious psychopathology is involved. Fortunately I have recovered from the malady of taking myself too seriously.

Matthew's parents were divorced and continued to battle, often drawing him reluctantly into the fray. Matthew was the youngest group member by a year and the least peer-connected of the group.

While Jack appeared to be more of an "actor-outer,"

Matthew was an "actor-inner" who appeared very sad. His intellectual style kept others away and masked the inner turmoil first uncovered when he revealed that he was hospitalized after trying to hang himself in sleep-away camp the summer before.

Rick was the newest member to the group. He was referred to what might be described as "adjustment problems of adolescence." Physically the most mature of the four boys, Rick appeared as one of those kids compelled to live up to his appearance, to try and act like someone much older than his thirteen years. He did not share a history of personal loss with the others, although his parents' escalating financial problems emerged as a previously unacknowledged stressor when we first met. His major loss was one shared by all four of the boys, the loss of childhood. The group was prepared for a new member, and they welcomed Rick with open arms as he boldly attempted to lead them away from all remnants of childhood.

My style of working with kids' groups invites the whole person to participate, not just the troubled parts. I do not see myself as what William Schwartz called a "fixer of broken objects." I want parents to know that I see more in their children than a diagnosis of some pathological condition might imply. I want the kids to know that my intention is not to hammer away at their flaws. I want all of them to know that the group is a place that members can help each other, a place where a sense of

belonging and competence can be developed, and the "normal" in all us, is allowed expression.

As with most adolescent groups, this group communicated through a meandering conversational style. There are a few clear roads and many detours. Some observers of my groups have asked me if my groups are always so unstructured. Frequently this coded message is an expression of anxiety at what is perceived as a lack of control. As I see it, this is how kids talk, and I do not ask them to function as little adults. Their language and interactional style is also a way of distancing adults. It is essential I try to understand their music since my intention is to allow their culture to exist within the group's space.

As the boys talked, common ground was established as several rich threads emerged from the fabric of the conversation. My role was to try and highlight common themes, make connections, encourage participation and inclusion, and to begin to articulate a destination for the group. Out of all of this came the purpose which included developing a reflective pause between impulse and action; addressing normal developmental issues; and mediating with the systems that they were becoming alienated from (i.e., parents, school authorities, etc.). They could accept this when it was translated in their language: e.g., to learn to think before doing something stupid, something that you might later regret; to discuss friends and sex and drinking and smoking and other things that you're interested in;

and to find ways to get along better in school or at home.

The integration of the purpose became most often evident when a story from the prior week was brought into the group discussion: e.g., "I could've really fucked that kid up when he said that to me, but I just walked away because I didn't want to be suspended again." "I was about to walk out of the store with the new headphones but I walked around with them for awhile and realized that this is wrong, I've known the store owner for years." When this occurs it provides the opportunity to ask the group members to look at the incident, to connect it to our purpose and to reinforce the actions that reflect desired behavior.

Purpose is also highlighted in the actions that take place in the group's here-and-now. Tempers become heated and members are faced with split second choices of lashing out or pausing. When the former predominates, an opportunity arises to literally stop the action and promote reflection. When the pause to reflect occurs spontaneously the members can be led through a journey to see how it worked.

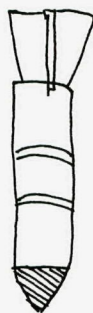
A primary group value is that the members help one another and not rely solely on me. This requires asking them, when the moment is right, "Did anyone ever have a similar situation? What happened? How did you deal with it?" Such queries often generate a collective sigh and an OH, here he goes again look from the members. It's during such moments that I

am challenged to silently crack the code which reveals that it is okay for me to pursue these questions, yet, I must accept that they will not willingly play along. I understand that the ruse is really a silent pact which affirms the difference between me (adult world representative) and them (kids' world representatives). I've come to realize, their hunger to have a relationship with an adult who can weather the treacherous waters.

Work with adolescents is full of paradoxes, many of which have to do with negotiating closeness. As a beginning group worker I struggled with feelings of wanting to be accepted by the kids, dare I say, as a peer. What a trap that was. In time I recognized that my self esteem could not depend upon their acceptance. I came to see that they needed me to keep my distance, yet remain close. A subtle journey this is, finding one's special place in a culture within which one can never attain full membership. As a colleague, David Bilides says, "adolescents are not the easiest population to work with. Few of them come up to you and say, 'thanks, that was a really great group, I got a lot out of it.' One learns to receive nourishment from many small, often non verbal rewards."

On a foggy evening on January 16th, 1991, at six o'clock my early adolescent boys' group arrived for their weekly meeting. Sometime soon thereafter and during the course of our meeting, the allied forces in the

Persian Gulf started bombing Iraq. I wondered how tuned in to these events the boys were. There was growing anxiety reflected in the media and in conversations picked up almost anywhere one ventured.



Just days earlier a former member of a past boys' group showed up at the front door of the Center accompanied by a uniformed naval officer. He was about to enlist and was requesting copies of his record, a prerequisite he informed me. He was just a few years older than the boys in my group and not too many years older than my two sons.

Following a brief and unimpassioned debate about the upcoming football playoffs leading to Super Bowl XXV, the talk shifted to the prospect of war. The January 15th deadline given to Saddam Hussein to leave Kuwait had passed eighteen hours earlier. Too young to have experienced the war in Viet Nam, yet old enough to know about indiscriminate terrorism and to have viewed innumerable movies and television programs featuring American mercenaries in action, the boys engaged in animated discussion of their country's military capacity.

They strutted their knowledge of the American arsenal of air power much like they might be debating a forthcoming sporting event. Cruise missiles and B-52's and stealth bombers and F-15's and tomahawks filled the air. The pride in their perceived strategic acumen was evident as each one tried to outdo the other. Especially confident with his knowledge was Rick, the physically imposing thirteen year old. He informed his fellow "nintendo" warriors that, "they (the Iraqis) only have MIGS." He went on to declare that, "The New York State police could beat Iraq!" His conclusion was left unchallenged.

Fully recognizing the protective nature of their discussion to that point and not wanting to assault their defenses with a lecture on the realities of war I asked them, "are any of you worried?" They actually startled me with the swiftness of their response, a stark contrast to the macho posturing that preceded it: "I'm afraid we'll be bombed... we might be hit... I can see World War Three... what if there's a nuclear war...?" Jack, whose father died two years earlier, was the last to respond. He spoke of the consequences of nuclear war in human terms. Without missing a beat he described a book he recently completed, *Johnny Got His Gun*, about the impact of war through the experience of a single soldier trapped inside of a severely damaged body.

I wasn't surprised by Jack's literary contribution. Earlier on in the group Jack revealed that he did have an

alternative means for expressing himself — poetry. He had recently shared a poem he wrote about a friend's death. Matthew, a self described "intellectual", a boy who had threatened to take his own life at age ten, told the others about "the prophecies of Nostradamus." He carefully detailed a prediction that he attributed to the 16th century French astrologer: "At the end of the 20th century a large man with a mustache wearing a blue coat and brandishing a large sword will conquer North America..." Months later Matthew joined his first "club." A group of mostly adults, and some young people who engaged in elaborately organized civil war reenactment.

On the prospect of terrorism the boys doubted that there would be any real protection. An irate Jack yelled about the planned lay-off of scores of New York City firemen. He then described the deaths of "two retarded boys" who "would have been saved if the local firehouse, a block from their house hadn't been shut down." (Within the next year Jack joined the junior division of the local volunteer fire department.) He and the others railed on about how "everything is falling apart." Jack's illustration seemed to highlight their diminishing faith in adults and in the "authorities" power to protect them.

I thought of my own sons who were only six and three at the time and those parents whose children were headed for the Persian Gulf, and those whose children lived in the Middle East. I was reminded of

a recent Memorial Day service and of the stirring tear-filled tribute of a mother remembering her son killed in Viet Nam. I recalled that one of my best friend's older brother was killed in the same war. The news came to him when he was a teenager, by way of uniformed officers at his front door.

I thought mostly about war's impact on families and that the boys in my group were but a few short years from the possibility of going to war themselves. As I looked at them I found this to be astounding.

As their earlier defensive posture gave way to a more open expression of anxiety and fear I asked a second question intended to enable them to find the resources within themselves and in the group to cope with their growing terror. I pointed to an empty chair and asked: "If a boy about your age walked in here now and sat down in that chair and he was shaking and asking for help to deal with the threat of war how would you help him?"

They said that they would tell him not to worry because "the bombs could never reach us" and if they ever got close "they would be blown out of the sky." Then there was a pause and Rick, the most "arsenal savvy" of the group said "you guys will probably think I'm a wimp, but I'm scared shitless." He punctuated his

confession by grasping the fingers of both hands behind his neck and then burying his head between his knees. This was a curious sight. It reminded me of the frequent air raid drills I'd participated in as an elementary school student in the nineteen-fifties ("duck and cover"). The other boys silently studied Rick's metamorphosis back to the innocence of childhood.



I asked the others if they thought Rick was a "wimp." Their response was a resounding "no!" and they revealed that they too were scared. I told them that they had nothing to be ashamed of, that war is scary and that it took a lot of courage for them to be as forthcoming and supportive as they had been. And then I tried my best to reassure them that they would be safe.

I was strong in my affirmation that they would be

safe, as I would be with my own children, yet I had my own anxiety to contend with and the knowledge that they weren't blind to the dangers of everyday life, let alone during war time. In the almost four years since this group meeting was held terrorists bombed the World Trade Center in Manhattan, just a few miles away from where we were meeting. My next door

neighbor worked in one of the twin towers. One cannot help but wonder about how safe we really are in the United States? As I write this in October 1994 American troops are again being deployed in the Persian Gulf.

The room fell silent following my attempt at reassurance. They asked to play a game that Matthew had brought in for the last ten or fifteen minutes. The game, "Advanced Dungeons and Dragons" is a fantasy game in which characters are created to battle various enemies and life threatening obstacles.

Matthew had prepared protocols (character profiles) for each of the boys. These protocols described their assets in such categories as special abilities, armor, hit points, wounds, weapons, ammunition and more.

For the remaining twenty minutes of the group meeting they played the game. Perhaps they were expressing their fears through another avenue, one which gave them temporary

mastery over their demons. I felt no need to contaminate the activity with interpretation but simply to allow them the space to relate to one another in the coded language of the game, language that kept me at a distance. I was an outsider who was allowed to bear witness to their attempt to cope with horror.

As the meeting ended the boys bolted out at a few minutes past seven o'clock. I instinctively flicked on the radio only to hear the President's press secretary, Marlin Fitzwater, announce: "The liberation of Kuwait has begun." Moments later two of the boys, Rick and Kenny burst through my door yelling, "they've started dropping bombs, they've started dropping bombs!"



Rick who gloated earlier that he had a "hot date" planned for the evening seemed to change his plans: "I'm going home to hide in my basement." Kenny remained. His eyes started to fill up and he said, "my father's not here yet and I'm scared. Can I stay with you until he gets here?" I gestured to Kenny, who had been brutalized as a child, to sit down. We heard an airplane overhead and the tears began to roll down Kenny's cheeks. "Every time I hear a plane I'm afraid it will drop a bomb. You know I was afraid of the dark when I was younger. I

live in the top part of our house and I'm afraid that the bombs will drop whenever I hear a plane." My reassurances were soon interrupted by the buzz of the telephone and the message of the arrival of his dad, his former foster father who would hang in with Kenny and adopt him, finally providing him with some stability and consistent care. Without hesitation Kenny, about half my size gave me a bear hug and, burying his head into my midsection said, "Thanks Andy, I hope to see you next week." I assured him that he would and as I escorted him down the winding staircase with my arm around his shoulder I could feel him trembling. Or was it me?

When I was in the seventh grade the news of Kennedy's assassination came to us through the classroom intercom. Twenty-eight years later, as I approached my fortieth birthday, the news of the war with Iraq arrived again from a disembodied voice, this time through my office radio. At twelve-and-a-half the news was followed by no human interaction, only blank stares and a gasp punctuated silence. We were dismissed and I returned home to an inescapable eeriness that I remember sharply to this day. And now the world stage was again intersecting with a gathering of seventh graders. As I look back to the boys' group I feel privileged to have been in a place that provided us with more than blank stares and silence. □

Author's Note

Some of the contents of this narrative was developed into an essay which appeared in *Families in Society*, (April, 1993). Diary of a boys group. (pp. 243-244)

Copyright of Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping is the property of Cleveland State University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.