

A Death In The Group Work Family

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Norman Goroff. At the time of his death in October 1989, he was a Professor at the School of Social Work, University of Connecticut in West Hartford. He also tried to practice, teach, and live according to his social work values and he died in the midst of a sentence explaining them.¹

by
Paul H. Ephross

Paul H. Ephross, Ph.D.,
Professor, University of
Maryland, School of Social
Work Baltimore, MD.

Introduction: The AASWG Symposia

Ever since I braved my own cold and the freezing winter winds of Cleveland's lakefront in 1979, I've looked forward to the Annual Symposium of the Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups (AASWG) each October. The Cleveland program honored the late Grace Longwell Coyle, an investigator of the relation between social science and social work, and an intellectual leader in the goals perspective in social work with groups. She was so warmly greeted by such an unexpectedly large response from the several hundred people present that a desire was voiced for follow-up in the form of an annual symposium, which has continued to this day. It is now sponsored by the Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups, an International Professional Association.

By the time this reminiscence and reflection is published and made available to readers of *Reflections*, I hope to be able to take pleasure in having missed only one of the first twenty symposia. A wealth of memories, all the important ones pleasant, crowd my mind

as I think back over the experiences which are associated with the nineteen I did get to. The memories are about equally divided between the programs of the symposia themselves—sessions attended and led, workshops and institutes participated in and directed, solo or with a partner—and breakfasts, lunches, and dinners with old and new friends, a geographical spread from San Diego to Chicago to Toronto to Québec Cité to Miami to Arlington, TX; in 1999, I hope, Denver, as scheduled, and in 2000, for the second time, the unique stresses, strains, rewards, and joys of hosting as the symposium returns to Baltimore.

On Being a "Group Worker"

For many of us, of three distinct generations, to identify oneself as a "group worker," or its more contemporary but duller relative, "a social worker with groups," means acknowledging and testifying to a deeply meaningful but somewhat complex identity. Easiest to understand is an identity with the profession and, for the most part, the organizational forms of social work. This is necessary but not sufficient. Next—some

¹Norman was also known to his colleagues as the founder, editor, and promoter of *Sociology and Social Welfare* at every professional meeting. After he asked if you had renewed your subscription, he would be hawking the journal to another. Norman set a wonderful example for this journal's editor. -ed.

would argue, first—comes a commitment to democratic process, a belief that groups, organizations, and societies operate best when those who participate in them have the authority and the responsibility for decision making about them. Included is a belief in nonviolence as a fundamental principle of human affairs, and the opposite of discrimination: celebration of and belief in the value of all forms of human diversity. Being a group worker requires a reluctance, if not a refusal, to categorize people based on static diagnoses, brief acquaintance, ignorance of structural causes of behavior, and rigid characterizations of health and illness. One should add to this incomplete list a belief in the values of group activities over a wide range of activity media and purposes.

Political ideology play an important, though sometimes ambivalent, part in group work ideology and identity. At one time progressive, i.e., left politics of one variety or another were virtually *de rigueur*; today, as it becomes less and less clear which politics are what, or what politics are, respectively, 'progressive' or 'conservative,' political stances vary more than they used to.

One shouldn't stereotype group workers. Even many leaders in the field do not fit the mold of guitar-strummers, lovers of camping though the mosquitoes be fierce and the food half-cooked, jolly extroverts, street gang workers, or

workaholics who enjoy their jobs more the greater the challenge and the less adequate the facilities and budgets. Many are shy, sometimes painfully so.

Others come to their work from deeply religious backgrounds, sometimes expressed through membership in one or another clergy. Others are refugees from one or another of the inhumanities and persecutions which seem to characterize each inhabited continent. Group workers are of all races and ethnicities, both sexes, all sexual orientations; they cover a very wide range of ages and vary in all other human attributes.

Characteristically, however, we share identity and membership; to put it most simply, we recognize each other and we generally enjoy each other's company. There are similarities between identifying as a group worker and as a member of an ethnic group.

Many of us went to graduate school together, or at least are fellow alumni of the same school, worked together at one point in our respective careers, were classmates in doctoral programs, served on boards or committees of professional organizations, co-authored articles or books together, or have had other points of contact over the years.

Professor Norman Goroff

None of these overlaps connected me with Norman Goroff. He was about ten years

older than I, had gone to a different Master's program, he to Case Western Reserve's in Cleveland, I to Boston University's, and he had taught for many years at the School of Social Work at the University of Connecticut, with which I have had no connection though I do know several its faculty members.

Norman was and I am Jewish. I think we would have agreed in part and disagreed in part had we ever talked about Jewish issues or Jewish identity. We never did. He was one of just a few people in my life who called me "boychik," a Slavized form of "boy" which has an affectionate connotation which the English severely lacks. Norman had been friends, many years before the event which is central to this narrative, with a close colleague of mine. Except for this last, our relationship had developed almost exclusively from our interactions at AASWG Symposia.

Norman had a deep identity with the Association; at one point, he held membership card #1 and was quite proud of this fact. Somehow or other, whether by accident or by design, Norman would appear as soon as I completed registering, indeed, sometimes before I had registered and once as soon as I got on the shuttle bus from the airport to the hotel in which the symposium took place. Wearing his characteristic gray suit, sometimes with a sweater vest, sometimes not, and possessor of a rather undisciplined gray beard which had once been much darker, Norman gave me,



as he did others, the impression that meeting me had both "made his day" and given him an opportunity to share his most recent thought, aphorism, observation about current news, or evaluation of what someone had said at last year's symposium fresh off his drawing board.

Norman generally appeared at a Symposium with a group of graduate students, especially when the symposium was within a radius of several hundred miles from West Hartford, CT. He had also founded the Practitioners' Press, located in Hebron, CT, and had filled an important need by issuing reprint editions of several group work and social work classics, which were on display at the annual symposia. He thought that everyone who attended should at least buy copies for their personal, professional libraries, while everyone who taught social work ought to use at least one of the books as texts.

Although he was known not to be in the best of health, he was indefatigable. Each annual encounter with Norman included, in some form, yet another refutation by him of an influential speech delivered by a University of Michigan professor of social work at a national meeting in 1962. At that meeting, the speaker had argued that group work needed to redeploy its personnel so that more would work with truly needy people—e.g., patients, institutionalized people, children in foster care, adjudicated offend-



ers—and not so disproportionate a share with ordinary citizens, such as people coming to neighborhood houses and community centers for leisure-time activities or children attending summer camps. The speaker had also argued that, to claim its share of professional status and recognition, group work needed to reallocate its efforts and its limited personnel to work for therapeutic purposes as part of a clinical team and share in the prestige and resources which accrued to clinical team members.

Norman knew my position on this issue. I think the 1962 speech, which still made him livid more than 25 years after it had been delivered, made some valid points. I certainly do not believe that group work belongs only in a clinical context, only in any one context, for that matter. But no matter how many times I had stated my position, no meeting with Norman of any length was complete without a panegyric, long or short, about why, how, and to what extent the 1962 speaker had been wrong. One could no more stop this than one could prevent clouds from bringing rain.

Starting a few years before the Montréal symposium, I would receive tape cassettes in the mail from Norman in which he expounded on his views on topics ranging from articles in professional journals to the future of the galaxy. It was always a pleasure to receive them. An

answer in the form of a tape cassette was requested, and it never occurred to me not to respond. Why? Because one just didn't do that to Norman. His evident sincerity, his absolute belief in his principles, and his eloquence, combined with the intensity with which he was committed to each of these, made him forceful in a usually quiet way. One didn't want to hurt him—at least, I didn't—and each felt that Norman would interpret our not listening to him or responding to his request to send him back a tape cassette them as a personal rejection, as a refusal to be loving, to a person who taught the importance of love in helping both individuals and groups.

**11e SYMPOSIUM ANNUEL
L'ASSOCIATION POUR L'AVANCEMENT
DU SERVICE SOCIAL DES GROUPE**

**11th Annual Symposium,
The Association for the
Advancement of Social Work
with Groups**

I particularly looked forward to this symposium for a number of reasons. As a native New Englander, I have good feelings towards Montréal and Québec, in fact, towards Canada in general, and I've had pleasant and rewarding experiences from Vancouver Island to Nova Scotia. As co-chair of the previous symposium, I was still a member of the Board of Directors and rather looked forward to its meeting in Montréal, at which meeting I knew my three years' term on the Board would

come to an end. This was, I think, the first symposium which would be thoroughly bilingual throughout, with more than a token number of sessions in both languages and considerable provisions for translation. It thus marked a step in the internationalization of the Association. I thought that the food at the opening banquet was a step above what's often characterized as "rubber chicken" hotel food. It was good to see old friends again, and to make my annual date with one of my oldest friends to have lunch together and 'get caught up.' The opening speeches were very much *à propos* the changing social and economic environments of both Canada and the United States. The attendees seemed many in number and high in spirit. In fact, there was some sense of the *joie de vivre* which the host city likes to attribute to itself.

After the opening speeches and some brief discussion, I walked over to Norman. He had come late to the session, having driven up from Connecticut with a car full of social work students. His face looked dark, and he had noticeable circles around his eyes, both signs that he was tired. He greeted me with great warmth and his usual bear-hug. We exchanged small talk as to which of us was teaching what, how we had been, and so on. Somehow, the conversation, which in toto lasted five minutes, if that, got around to a group of psychiatric residents whom I had worked with as their facilitator throughout two and 3/4 years of

their three-year residencies. I said that part of the group process had been an ongoing discussion as what to call themselves; whether this group was a didactic group, a support group, or a group therapy group. Norman said, as I could have anticipated, that he didn't like the terms "therapy group" or "treatment group," but rather preferred the term "healing group." Having said this, his eyes rolled back into their sockets, and he fell. One moment I was having a rational conversation on terminology with an old friend, and the next moment he was... gone. The words "healing group" were his last.

Three sets of images flashed through my mind. The first was my training in first aid ("make sure the airway is clear," "loosen or cut away any restrictive clothing," etc.). The second was a composite of all the sermons, homilies, and eulogies I had heard about the fragility of life. The third was a sense of unreality and disbelief. The event lacked what literary critics call "verisimilitude." It wasn't like "real life." If one saw it in a movie one would consider it contrived. Yet, it was happening.

Norman was not a lightweight, and I knew I couldn't catch him in mid-air, but I was afraid that he would hit his head on the supports of the pedestal on which stood the table beside which we had been talking. I stuck out my leg and he fell on it rather than on the table leg. About 80 percent of the attendees at the dinner and opening

session had left the auditorium; the others were milling about or moving towards the doors. I remember thinking that some people didn't "see" what had happened though they weren't far away. A number of people did come over to form a sort of circle. Someone volunteered to go get Norman's wife, Charlotte, who had left and gone upstairs to their hotel room. I asked someone else to notify the hotel and get emergency personnel.

When Charlotte Goroff arrived, it turned out that Norman's heart condition was so dicey that they had made it a practice to carry his X-rays and ECT tracings with them when they traveled. She was understandably very upset, but relatively controlled. Such an event was not entirely unexpected, she later said. However, she said, he wouldn't have heard of not coming to the Symposium, bringing students with him, and driving straight through so that the students and he could attend the opening session.

I'll spare the reader the details of the first aid which I attempted, I being a one-time first aid instructor and Boy Scout merit badge instructor in first aid (this in relation to my first year placement in group work) though the summer camp staff primers in first aid I used to give to counselors all took place many years ago. After about 20 minutes, it seemed to me that it was unlikely that Norman would revive. At that point, the lifeguard from the hotel's swimming pool arrived, and very



quickly thereafter, the obviously well-trained and very efficient Emergency Medical Technicians from the city of Montréal. All was to no avail. He was not responding to CPR, as he had not at any time since he collapsed. I remember thinking it kind of the EMTs that they said that I had done what I should have and what they would have done had they been there earlier. Perhaps an hour had elapsed before the EMT crew departed with what we all felt in our hearts was a dead body. Norman's death was confirmed by the hospital immediately upon his arrival and the news brought back to us by a member of the hotel's staff.

As the officers and other leadership of the Association and the local symposium sponsoring committee heard the news, many of them came back to the banquet hall, asked whether they could help, were helpful and supportive to Charlotte, and made clear their upset and their sadness at what had happened. A memorial meeting for Norman was quickly planned. (My memory is that it happened the next day, late in the afternoon, but I'm still a bit foggy about the rest of the symposium and it's possible that the memorial meeting was a day later.)

It was well attended, solemn, participatory, and I think that all of us who attended found it helpful. With a member of the Association who had known Norman for many years acting as chairperson, people were enabled to share memories, express regrets and positive

feelings about various accomplishments and meaningful contributions he had made to others. Some of his faculty colleagues were present and spoke warmly about their years of working together with Norman. His students, as was to be expected, seemed shaken by the experience. At the same time, several did talk quite eloquently at the memorial meeting about their perceptions of his teaching, mentioning reactions which Norman would dearly have enjoyed and appreciated hearing. Some of the Connecticut faculty were understandably concerned about arrangements for everyone who needed to get back to Connecticut.

Aftermath: Who Needed to Forgive Whom?

The symposium proceeded as planned. Everyone went where they were supposed to go, including me. The people from the University of Connecticut were involved in making arrangements for returning home. I don't remember very much of the content of the symposium, certainly less than I remember those that came before and since.

I agreed to serve as Secretary of the Association, a role which at the time was filled by vote of the Board of Directors. I felt good about this because it made me a member of the Board of Directors for what turned out to be five years. If I had known how much work was involved in taking and distributing the minutes of a good many meet-

ings, though, I might not have been so pleased. But the Montréal symposium is permanently associated in my innards with Norman's death.

My feelings at the time that Norman collapsed were partly muted, as my feelings tend to be in emergencies. Though I sometimes overreact to minor issues, I generally do well in emergencies. My inner sensation at such times is one of clarity, and I feel as though I'm looking through the "wrong" end of a pair of opera glasses. Things look very clear and sharp, but also quite far away.

I felt a great deal of sadness, some of which has recurred in the course of writing this article, remembering a most dramatic and unexpected lesson in the fragility of life, not only day to day but even minute to minute. I will admit to a bit of unease about having jumped into the first-aid-provider role, literally without thinking about it at all, that I remember. Perhaps this is a reflection of the "if only" kind of thinking which so often accompanies sorrow as, for example, "if only my grandfather had consented to have surgery at the time it was recommended, perhaps he would still be alive." My version would be: "If only someone really skilled in the latest wrinkles on CPR had been working on Norman, perhaps he would have revived."

To the best of my knowledge, though, my behavior filled a void that needed to be filled. I certainly wished then and wish now, from the heart, that my emergency first aid had been ef-

fective. Charlotte Goroff thanked me warmly when we talked some weeks later. I felt that was very kind of her and that it showed her nobility of spirit that she was concerned with my feelings at a time of her own grief and mourning.

I gave a presentation from notes about the death of Norman Goroff at a subsequent symposium in Hartford. The program co-chairs who had been, respectively, colleague and student of Norman's thought it quite appropriate for this to be on the program. The presentation was well attended, and I thought both the level of participation and the responses to my initial presentation were quite sound. At that meeting, I was asked by the regular Editor of this journal to write an article for publication. Though I have been known to procrastinate, there are more reasons, I think, why I have not been able to do so until now (the time of writing this reflection), just a few months under nine years since the Montréal symposium. Nor, while I share some of the taboos about death which characterize our society, are death or the fear of death particularly traumatizing to me. Nor, though I was fond of Norman Goroff in several ways, were either of us very important people in the other's life.

Why, then, do my introspections dredge up vague

senses of guilt? I didn't do anything wrong, after all, in relation to his death. In fact, I tried, however ineffectively, to reverse what had happened and to revive him. I think that in part, the ineffectiveness of the first aid I administered is part of the story for me. The one person with whom I have shared this unease on my part, a physician on the faculty of a Baltimore medical school, understood instantly and related what I was saying to feelings that he finds common among medical residents and other young physicians. So, I need to forgive myself for not having been able to do something which I was not able to do and perhaps no one would have been able to do at that time. Somehow, this self-forgiveness should come more easily than forgiving myself for having misunderstood a student, or a client, or a group member, or a colleague and

therefore having been ineffective. In fact, it's been harder and has taken longer.

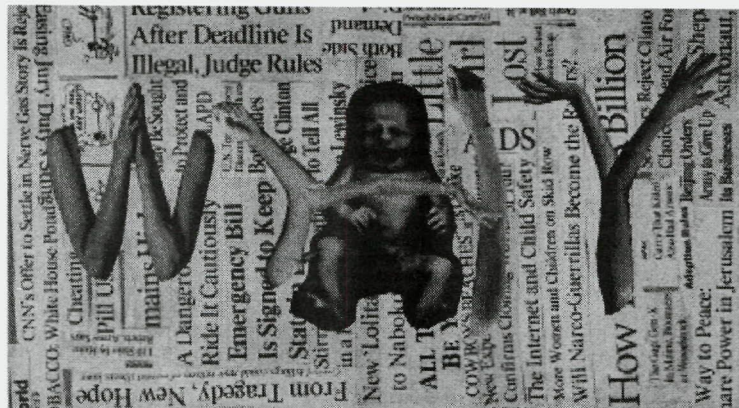
Why? I think part of the answer is in the title of this piece. Social workers who identify themselves as group work-

ers, including many, if not all, of the founders of the Association, feel like family to me. Identifying oneself as a group worker has some commonality with identifying oneself as a member of an ethnic group. This is one reason that what happens in this Association has, from time to time, been a source of strong feelings for me. Membership in a family does that.

Norman Goroff's death felt like the death of a family member, someone related to me and I to him. Maybe his calling me "boychik" had more meaning than I realized at the time. In this context, I need to forgive myself in the same way that one needs to when a relative dies and one struggles to avoid the "if only he..." or "if only I..." forms of blaming and self-flagellation, respectively.

Most years, in the Fall semester, I teach a course for second-year graduate students in group treatment. I do use the terms "group treatment" and "group therapy." Periodically, I "hear" Norman saying that he prefers the term "healing group." I know what he means, and there is much to think about in trying to specify and measure healing in groups. There is warmth and

perhaps even love in the term, "healing," which is absent in the colder words "therapy" and "treatment." But I think, after all this time, he would forgive me for using the more common terms. □



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.