

LOVE and FUN and THERAPY TOGETHER

by RALPH KEYES

Maybe we never quite understood what group encounter was to begin with. It caught on so fast, spread so quickly and grew into so many diverse forms that it's no wonder if we were confused about it. Now that we've had the chance to study the movement, perhaps it will turn out to be something less therapeutic than we imagined, but lots more fun.

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The encounter movement was born screaming in California, where it is now entering death throes. Growth centers there are withering like desert flowers in summer. Esalen has become more spiritual, Kairos died, was resurrected and seems finally to have passed to its reward. Where groups do survive, they're usually with a *shtick*, a gimmick—singles encounter (with complimentary beverage), Primal encounter or the Death Sensitivity weekend.

In Los Angeles, a new firm called "Uniquity" is peddling encounter paraphernalia, including foam rubber swords, special group pillows, encounter dolls and a "Fair Fight Training Manual."

One can almost hear the collective

sigh of relief, not just from encounter group critics, but also members of the media who are no longer being forced to figure out just what this human potential thing is that they've been reporting. Like so many things coming out of California, encounter groups have always been a bewilderment for the press, so difficult to categorize. Are they group therapy? Group dynamics perhaps, or buzz groups? Maybe group grope!

With no definite context to work from, news coverage of the human potential movement (or whatever it's called these days) has sometimes occurred under wildly varied headings. "T-School of Behaviorism," for example, is what *Business Week* once labeled a sensitivity-oriented college. *Ebony* covered the "psychotherapy" being administered Houston policemen in interracial groups and *Glamour* for its part offered "Group Analysis Make-Overs," suggesting ways to be more beautiful through sensitivity training and better makeup. ("Her pretty-little-boy look was a form of aggressiveness and a refusal to grow up.")

Fortunately, nude groups came along early enough to give the press a news peg. After *Life's* encounter coverage by Jane Howard in mid-1968 featured naked bodies in four out of 14 pictures, subsequent coverage in the media relied heavily on nude grouping. One magazine even hired models to pose topless for an otherwise serious article on encounter.

Some sensitivity trainers consider *Life's* layout the beginning of the end

of their chances for fair media coverage. "Group therapy" as the most popular label was replaced by "group grope." *Adam* magazine featured "A Lurid Description of 'Sensitivity Training'—America's Newest Sex Game," and *Modern Romances'* Aunt Martha wondered in her advice column, "Encounter Group or Sex Orgy? This Girl Could be Headed for Trouble!"

The confusion in our media about encounter groups is really just a particular version of the problem facing anyone interested in them: knowing what context to perceive groups from, and thus how to evaluate their impact. As therapy, encounter should be judged one way; as group dynamics, another; or worship, a third. (Group grope has its own, unique problems.)

This problem of context has plagued not only the poor reporters trying to know what to make of all the shouting and carrying on, but group leaders, participants and critical professionals as well.

One such professional, Bruce Maliver, has recently written a book, *The Encounter Game*, suggesting the whole thing is horseplay really, dangerous horseplay. A New York psychoanalyst, Maliver is one of the mental health professionals who, almost since the beginning of encounter groups, have muttered among themselves about this dangerous approach to therapy, staffed by ill-trained quacks and charlatans. Now this message has a wider audience, and an orator to proclaim it in the form of Dr. Maliver, who has be-

come the loudest antiencounter voice among professional psychologists.

Too bad for them. In *The Encounter Game*, Dr. Maliver essentially plays the social scientist as gossip. His book is a series of disrelated anecdotes, nonstop polemics and winking leers with occasional dabs of other people's research all purporting to expose players of what he calls (*ad nauseam*) "the encounter game."

Dr. Maliver faults the human potential movement for not adopting

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the rigorous self-examination of social science, while explaining that he—regretfully—did no research of his own for lack of a grant. The author assures us that he wanted to at least engage in thorough documentation, but was dissuaded by his editors in the interests of readability.

This New York analyst was a willing pupil. *The Encounter Game* has only the most cursory citations. Maliver's treatment of the human potential movement is based largely on occasional groups and demonstrations he sat in on, talks with participants and odd bits from "interviews" he refers to vaguely.

Two years before *The Encounter Game* was published, Dr. Maliver ran a notice in the *New York Times Book Review* seeking "people willing to share their negative experiences of and reactions toward encounter and sensitivity groups, to be used in the preparation of a book on that subject."

The book produced by such research is really a pamphlet, a tract from one sect of psychology against another. It's a shame that pamphleteering has gone out of style and polemics such as Maliver's must be passed off as books. The encounter movement could use a good debunker. Bruce Maliver isn't it.

And more's the pity, because in his shrillness he raises important questions about the group movement, and he does mix insight with his scolding. Fortunately, nearly every valid question raised by Maliver is considered, probed more deeply and with voluminous documentation in *Encounter Groups: First Facts* by Morton Lieberman, Irving Yalom and Matthew Miles.

This report of their study of 17 encounter groups involving 206 Stan-

ford students in 1968–1969 is exactly the informed inquiry the encounter movement has long needed. Overall, Yalom, Lieberman and Miles found that group participants in nearly equal proportion benefited from participation, showed no effects or were negatively affected.

The results of this study indicate that contrary to encounter dogma: high-risk groups aren't necessarily high-yield; feedback, self-disclosure and the experience of strong emotion of themselves evoke little change in group participants; structured group exercises are at best irrelevant to the group process, important mostly for enhancing the leader's status; and psychological casualties are a result of group participation. (Here the leaders were scrupulous about attribution. In contrast to Maliver, for example, who reported suicides by encounter group participants as *ipso facto* proof of danger, the Stanford researchers didn't count the one suicide in their sample a casualty since investigation showed his problems long antedated group participation.)

To their surprise, Yalom, Lieberman and Miles found the 15 group leaders—all highly trained professionals—were far worse than group participants at identifying casualties. For this and other reasons, the researchers concluded that the plea of encounter critics for more training of group leaders is a wasted effort and a superfluous issue. Also contrary to antiencounter dogma, this study showed no significant impact of groups in encouraging student participants to drop out of college, become antiintellectual or stop studying. Their grades remained stable.

In the end, write Yalom, Lieberman and Miles, "it was concluded that overall, encounter groups show a modest positive impact, an impact significantly lower than participants' view of their own change would lead one to assume." On the other hand, "at their best, encounter groups provide intense, personal experiences with others in a responsible manner... There is no evidence in our findings which would suggest that a prime attraction of encounter groups is 'headless' release or legitimization of impulsive acting out, as often seen by their most vociferous critics."

This sketch of their findings does little justice to the complex and thorough study of encounter groups that Yalom, Lieberman and Miles have given us. I doubt we'll get a better one, even though their research does have limitations. *Encounter Groups: First Facts* is based

on particular kinds of groups in ways I don't think the authors consider adequately. All of their groups save two were: held in the San Francisco Bay Area, where unusually colorful, high-intensity group styles prevail; involved college students, who bring a unique set of problems to groups; involved Stanford students, who bring an even unique set; had tape recorders and silent observers present at all times, which couldn't help but influence the process; were conducted on various schedules, none being the most common weekend format; were led exclusively by men; and focused on the leader in a more pervasive way than groups with a more "leaderless" ethic. The two exceptions were tape-led groups, exceptions only in not focusing on the leader, who also wasn't male.

But these are nit-picks. A more basic problem, not just with Yalom, Lieberman and Miles but with most analysts of the group movement, is that their background in psychology

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and therapy focuses inquiry on whether groups produce change. "Encounter groups," they state flatly, "are people-changing groups."

This is the most common context of the human potential movement, for proponents as well as critics. Whether it's therapy *per se* that's sought in group participation, or simply "learning" or "movement"—change is always the agenda. As a result, encounter groupers and encounter critics have puffed all out of proportion the potency of this process, its potential to forge a New Man, or destroy old ones. Whether one sees their impact as malignant or benign, the therapeutic impact of groups is what's usually at issue. It's unfortunate that most discussion about groups is conducted by psychologists of one denomination or another, who are examining encounter's power to heal. This may not be its real power.

Encounter is vastly overrated as therapy, and underrated as entertainment. In the last group I attended, one participant told us that he went to every encounter he heard about, explaining: "I used to go to Las Vegas a lot and gamble. Now I just go to encounter groups."

To view encounter groups as en-

tainment, as respite, tension relief or just "good talk" is to make them at once less than they've claimed to be, and more.

Bill Coulson, in his *Groups, Gimmicks and Instant Gurus*, has given us such a unique perception of encounter groups, both more modest and more attainable than the exaggerated drum-beating of insecure group leaders. "Encounter," explains the philosopher-psychologist, "is what just happens when people have enough time together that they get

around to what they have always postponed in customary social settings."

A member of the Center for Studies of the Person, and confessed veteran of thousands of hours of encounter, Coulson tells us that he seldom attends groups anymore. No less than the other two authors, he pans the movement for its pretensions, often doing so with gentle insight. Speaking of leaderly routines, Coulson writes, "if they are harmless and keep the leader occupied and

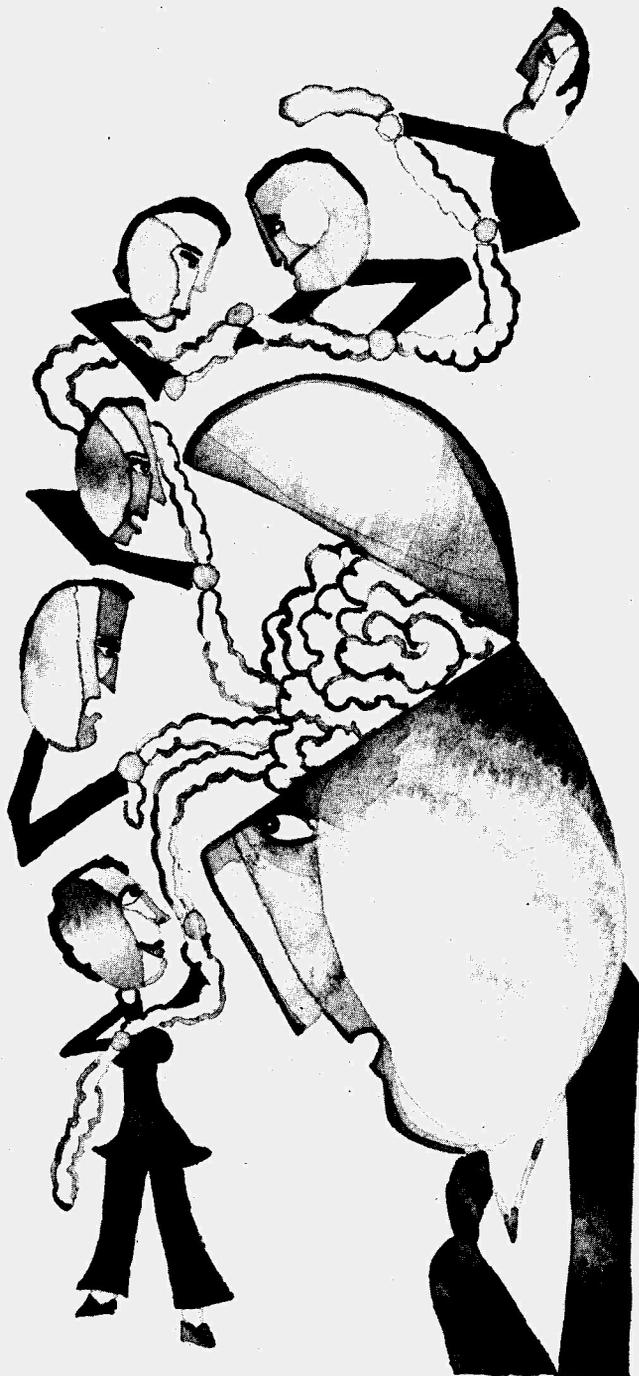
make him feel that through them he can justify his presence in the group, then it is not bad."

He thus goes further than Yalom, Lieberman and Miles, who reached a similar conclusion about leaderly gimmicks, in questioning how important the leader is at all. One of the more intriguing, but unexamined, items in the Stanford study was their observation in passing that the group whose members kept in touch most afterwards, and became friends, was a tape-led, or leaderless, group. Members remembered each other's names longer than most participants in other groups. Within the study's criterion of change-inducement, the record of this group without a leader was undistinguished. But by another criterion—of relating to everyday life, facilitating friendship and relieving alienation—a tape-led group may have been the most successful of all.

If one looks at groups in a therapeutic context, as do Yalom, Lieberman and Miles, examining their capacity to facilitate change—then comparative leader behavior is crucial. If, on the other hand, one looks to groups not for change but something else—relief from loneliness, communion or even a good time—then the question of leadership declines in relevance. Thus the evaluation of different styles of leadership may be less basic to judging groups than the context from which you perceive them. In the end, "encounter group" could prove just a fancy name for what any group of people would do during an extended period of time together, trying to be open.

This is more or less the conclusion Coulson reaches in his too brief book, saying he now prefers to encounter his family more than the endless parade of strangers in "woods weekends." Through groups, he feels, what we've really been searching for is simply a special occasion to be together without running off quickly, and "An encounter group is simply such a special occasion."

Such a modest claim for groups is one that can liberate them from fantasy goals, and allow the pursuit of real ones. Once encounter groups are no longer seen as psychological dynamite for blasting people into CHANGE! GROWTH! A NEW CONSCIOUSNESS! and all the other prayed-for effects, only then can they begin to fulfill a real potential for providing us with opportunity to be more open, experiment with new behavior, slow down and pay attention or just enjoy the pleasure of a weekend's intimacy.



These are very real needs in this society, needs being met poorly elsewhere, and I think our fascination with groups—even our chuckling—reflects this need. We may laugh at *Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice*, but also we're intrigued. The giggling may mask fascinated nervousness. Jerry Diamond, who has gone from directing a Los Angeles growth center to the production of encounter films, says of *Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice*, "People in the theaters would laugh at what was on the screen, but they also had a hunger for the kind of freedom depicted by the picture."

For me, the most intriguing dimension of encounter groups, yet the

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dimension least explored, is the impact of groups on our culture—both directly and as a metaphor. This impact is hard, perhaps even impossible, to pin down. Not the least of the problem is sorting out what can be attributed to groups, what to drugs, the youth revolt or various Maharishis—especially when so many people sample a variety of such dishes.

Still, when I read a recent ad for furs called "Give Yourself a Present to Congratulate Yourself on Being Yourself," which includes the lines: "You're you. And there are all sorts of things you like doing. . . . Telling people how you feel about them. And how you feel about yourself. . . . If you feel mink is a kick with jeans and chinchilla is a knockout with knickers, fine. There are no rights. Or wrongs. Except how you feel," then I'm ready to risk saying the encounter style has diffused into our culture.

No one can say accurately how many Americans have attended encounter groups. Yalom, Lieberman and Miles do quote without argument one estimate of 5,000,000. (An astonishing 50 percent of Stanford students had been in one or more groups at the time of their study.) If two-thirds of all Americans who have ever been in a group were influenced by the experience, for better or worse, as were that proportion of the Stanford sample, then the collective impact on our culture could be profound. Among their 206-person sample alone, Yalom, Lieberman and

Miles found some of the following actions being taken by participants as a result of their group experience: quitting championship swimming, joining a spiritual sect, deciding to resist the draft, deciding to join the navy.

If we generalize from this, might we wonder, for example, whether Daniel Ellsberg's encounter experience in California played any role in his radicalization? Or whether Louise Day Hicks has been less vociferous a racial conservative since participating in an interracial marathon? Or whether Betty Friedan's group experiences had any influence on the public role she plays today?

Barbara McNair reports that soaking in Esalen's hot baths gave her the courage to pose nude for *Playboy*. And Dyan Cannon talks in every other movie magazine you pick up about the impact of Esalen on her life. (As well as Primal Screaming, religious experiences, psychiatry and drugs, she says.)

Then there is Assemblyman John Vasconsellos of California, a highly successful public figure (judged "Best Freshman Assemblyman of 1967" by the Sacramento press corps) who gets reelected from a conservative San Jose district even as he gives talks on topics like "The Encounter Way of Being in Politics," and sends personally revealing newsletters to his constituents.

How do we assess such impact?

I'm not trying to evaluate the pros and cons of encounter fallout, only its presence. Groups have had a direct impact on theater, making it more personally revealing of actors and involving of the audience. New forms of worship, based on personal testament and body contact, have evolved from grouping, as have alternative styles of education. Perhaps even personal journalism owes some such debt. (My friend Elizabeth Hall thinks Max Lerner's columns have grown noticeably squishier since he got his back rubbed at Esalen.)

Then there is the more frivolous fallout, the "sensitivity cards" and "sensitivity tumblers" with ready-prepared messages, as well as "sensitivity tanning" offered by Almay's Sun Creme, and Van Heusen shirts for "a touching experience" as modeled by an encounter groupie with female hands clutching him from behind. Less easy to attribute are the TV ads in which a sincere Ford facilitator leads a group discussion on the nature of his product, or the Milk Advisory Board spots where celebrities reveal their innermost feelings about milk.

Encounter groups by now have

provided the setting for at least four novels, six feature-length movies and innumerable television shows. *Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice* is being revived as a weekly show on ABC, and Bob Newhart's psychologic comedy series already relies heavily on group situations for laughs. Cartoonists by now find encounter familiar enough and fertile enough to be always good for a standby gag. Even Donald Duck once asked Daisy, "What's an encounter group?" A time to talk, he's told, let your emotions take over and get to know yourself better. Meeting a good-looking blonde, Donald says he'd like to know better, he dances with her, gets tangled up with her boyfriend and ends up on the floor with a black eye. "Heavens," Daisy says in the last frame, "You really did have an ENCOUNTER."

Such fallout may seem absurd, but mightn't it also mask a fascination, a yearning drowned in chuckles? *Playboy's* July 1973 issue—which included a cartoon of naked bodies orgying, one saying to another, "Remember when our group therapy encounters consisted entirely of touching faces and looking intently into each other's eyes?"—also included a review of the latest encounter movie ("Here Comes Every Body") which said, "It's the next best thing to Esalen itself for anyone who has ever felt qualms mingled with curiosity about how encounter groups actually function."

This country is filled with millions of people who have satisfied that curiosity directly, as well as millions more who haven't, but can't avoid

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encounter rub-off from friends, at work and through the media. And this is the context for groups that I feel needs far more attention, the cultural residue that falls short of claims and charges, but influences our society nonetheless.

Encounter groups may ultimately prove as important by metaphor as for their own sake. By this I mean that the ways we talk of groups today, even when we mock them, could just be a shorthand for getting at what's really on our minds: the openness, intimacy and communion that groups stand for. These needs are being met so poorly elsewhere



that we often turn to groups, or even the notion of groups, to cope. It may not be change we seek in encounter so much as respite.

At the end of their massive study, Yalom, Lieberman and Miles wondered whether the questions they asked were the right ones and whether their context was appropriate. "Perhaps we have erred in examining encounter groups as if they were activities organized primarily for people-changing," write the three on page 452 of their 455-page book. "Perhaps we have demanded evidence that is inappropriate to the major meaning of encounter groups as enterprises not for

people-changing but for people-providing. Perhaps the import of encounter groups lies not in how many people leave them with new ways of thinking about and responding to themselves and the world they live in and new strategies for coping with life. Perhaps there is a much simpler need that encounter groups are engineered to provide efficiently and effectively—that of momentary relief from alienation, which some have called the most prevalent illness of our times."

In its original manifestation, the encounter movement is declining. Few will claim any longer that this movement can produce the openness, love and mental health it once

promised. The study of Yalom, Lieberman and Miles has told us most clearly what groups can't do, particularly that they can't change very many people for the better.

Now I think we're free to pursue what encounter can do. With a far more limited context, groups can be freed to pursue modest goals like helping friends to talk straighter, confront problems more directly, be open to feelings and work on a sense of community. Compared to the claims on early handbills, this agenda may seem paltry. Compared to what's in fact available, in or out of the human potential movement, such fare is a feast.

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