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The Politics of Meeting

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The Politics of Meeting

Peter Gabel

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A woman on a plane said to me recently, "Never say anything you don't want to create." The deep point of this to me is that the way I manifest myself to you determines to some important extent what you can feel is real or possible, and that the way you manifest yourself to me constricts or expands my horizon in the same way. In relation to each other we each become "one of the others," and in so doing we shape each other's experience. This leads to some perceptions about the reality we create at law school meetings.

The Problem of Collective Denial

We are all frightened of groups larger than five people. This may be because our conditioning has been so isolating and our experience of community so rare. In a society where common trust is only taken as a given among families of blood relatives (and then usually in a distorted form), we each instinctively respond to public gatherings by trying to protect ourselves against an expected rejection by others. We do this by denying others access to our real selves, through various forms of withdrawal (for example, silence or speech-making). But in denying others access to ourselves, each of us becomes one of the rejecting others to the others. The circle of collective denial is that each of us, in our capacity as "one of the others," creates the fearful group of others that each of us is afraid of.

The way to combat this collective flight is to refuse to help to create it.

Us-Them Thinking

Us-Them thinking consists of perpetually inventing a “them” to blame for the group’s paralysis — “the deans,” or “the students,” for example. The argument always comes down to “we can’t do anything because of ‘them’.” And the effect of this is to prevent anything very real from happening out of fear of “them,” or worse, out of fear of being found out as “one of them.” People become very careful about what they say and this creates the impression that one should be very careful about what one says.

Like “the Russians,” “they” do not exist as a “them” unless everyone agrees to give everyone else the impression that they do. And this goes for the “sacred them,” too: racists, sexists, homophobics. The key is to not want to take isolated remarks as signs of a “them” that isn’t there because this is what leads to our recurring vision of Armageddon: reciprocally projected us-them fantasies followed by hallucinatory them-wars.



Compulsion to vote

Obsession with Procedure

Obsession with procedure is designed to block the flow of group feeling by claiming the group isn’t properly constituted. Behind these procedural debates one can usually find two main ideas, both of which are based on us-them thinking.

One idea is that the group exists in order to reach a series of dis-

crete decisions. These decisions are reached by breaking up into a series of isolated individuals and voting. The second idea is that each sub-grouping that defines itself through its difference from everyone else in the school must be "represented" by an exact number of voting units. Taken together, the two ideas reflect an expectation of "showdowns" and so help to create them.

Groups are not really collections of isolated individuals. Each has its own distinct social reality. One such reality is the group whose members experience themselves as isolated individuals and who reinforce their common solitude through the circle of collective denial. But we can create more relaxed groups in which people feel more connected to each other through working on common projects. Obsession with procedure is mainly intended, unconsciously, to cope with the risk of non-connection by making sure that the attempt is not made.

The real work of committees is not to vote on a series of discrete issues, but to develop this common feeling through interesting, non-paranoid discussions and through taking common action to affect the school environment for the better. For this to really happen, it's important to involve different groups who may not fully trust each other or understand each other's experience and needs. The objective should be to overcome existing antagonisms and not to maintain them, as us-them thinking tries to do. Voting once in a while is okay, but an excessive focus on voting, "representation," and "protecting everyone's rights" only reinforces the impression that the differences among us are fixed.

The Role of the Chair

Overcoming all this takes discipline and practice. It requires becoming aware of how your behavior affects everyone else and then not wanting to do it anymore and then, eventually, not doing it. Since it takes a while to even become conscious of how each of us becomes an other for each other, much less for this awareness to ricochet into a critical mass that can dissolve collective denial, the chairperson must perpetually prevent the group from snowballing into general panic. His or her role should be something like a conscience.

This means: a) ordering and moving the agenda so as to maximize discussion on interesting issues; b) intervening to bring the ground into focus whenever anxiety starts to get out of hand; c) allowing a mix of spontaneous exchanges and calling on people who have raised their hands; and d) helping tentative people to speak and people who speak

too much to quiet down. It's not so much a matter of learning a set of skills as it is of keeping a pulse.

DOONESBURY

by Garry Trudeau



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