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THE
WAY OUT
RADICAL ALTERNATIVES IN AUSTRALIA

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ENCOUNTER COMMUNITY: A SYDNEY EXPERIMENT

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Early in 1974, a number of people were invited to attend a meeting to discuss the formation of an on-going, and leaderless Encounter-type group. Invitations had been restricted to those who had attended one or more formal Encounter courses, and this was the only prerequisite for participation as an inaugural member in the proposed group. The group was seen as providing a framework for those interested in alternate and 'intentional' communities and the application of 'encounter' and like techniques towards this end.

Of the twenty-five people who attended the original discussion, nineteen indicated they wished to participate. Four of these withdrew before attending the first meeting and two others gave apologies but expressed their desire to participate in subsequent activities.

At each meeting a decision is made on the date and place for the next meeting. Meetings are held in the home of one of the members. Where convenient the venue has been rotated. To date meetings have been held every three to five weeks with each session lasting about twelve hours.* One session consisted of a weekend residential, and all other sessions have been held on Saturdays.

The two people who apologised for not attending the first meeting, did not subsequently join the group. Two other members attended sporadically then lapsed, and two members left the group after giving their reasons for withdrawing. The membership of the group now stands at nine people. Shortly after the formation of the group several additional people expressed the desire to participate but the group decided that, at least for the time being, the membership would be closed. In general there was felt to be a need for time to develop a deeper knowledge of each of the members. The question of enlarging the group is currently under discussion. When a group decision has been required this has been made on the basis of consensual agreement, and if no such agreement is reached, then no group action is taken.

The composition of the group consists of more females than males. Ages range from early twenties to early fifties. Occupations of members are diverse and include students, and clerical, administrative, technical and professional workers. Most members

reside or work in the inner city area. Some live within walking distance of each other. The value of close residential proximity has come to be keenly appreciated. Visiting between members, or contact by telephone, is frequent and often occurs daily. The nature and intensity of interaction which has developed between members has been likened to that of an extended family or 'commune' but with the exception that the members do not reside under the one roof.

Two of the members, not known to one another prior to the formation of the Group, are now sharing a house. Since the formation of the Group some members have participated in additional formal Encounter and, or Co-Counselling courses.† As well as providing an environment for personal growth the existence of and particular structure of the Group has provided a network for support in times of emotional need. Individuals are available, or mini-groups can be formed at short notice to meet such needs. From time to time, mini-groups have been formed on a topic of special concern to the members involved.

The comments below are by several members of the Group and have been expressly written for this article. The final comment was taped during a meal break in a group session and has been abridged.

'For me the main attractions of this group are firstly the fact that it is an on-going group and therefore does not set limits on what may be achieved (or attempted); secondly the fact that it is leaderless which encourages a sort of democratic anarchy, and thirdly the fact that it is unstructured which avoids the artificiality of "games" having no relevance to real life situations.

'While some of the original members have dropped out, I feel that those who remain form a mutually caring group who are sensitive to each others needs and difficulties. There is an atmosphere where differences can be "worked through". I feel a general optimism for the future of the Group.'

'I have had many opportunities to get to know myself more fully, and have never had the experience of getting to know so many people so deeply in such a relatively short time, as I have had in

* Such sessions are unstructured but in practice follow the encounter techniques outlined in W. Schutz, *Elements of Encounter* (Joy Press, 1973) but with the exception that the group has no formal 'facilitator'.

† For a description of Re-evaluation Counselling see Thomas J. Scheff 'Re-evaluation Counselling: Social Implications', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, No. 12, Spring, 1972.

this Group. I also feel very much accepted (which is not my usual feeling in a social group), and hope that we will all continue to grow and get to know each other more fully.'

'To join a group with an attitude of having "heard it all before" and to find it to be a dynamically powerful way to relearn relating has been for me a joyful discovery. Real, human relationships have emerged, communication has been facilitated, and the cynicism with which I joined the group has given way to a trust and confidence never before experienced with a group of people. I'm grateful.'

'I wish to communicate honestly and without fear. Opportunities to do so are minimised in our society, therefore there is a need to arrange such encounters. Because of the need to organise a location and programme, and to provide guidance, there is an opportunity for commercial exploitation and psychological manipulation. However, these aspects do not invalidate the concept of open expression of ideas and emotions.'

'The formation of a permanent Group is partly an attempt to overcome or eliminate such dangers. It also deals with one other undesirable feature of non-continuing groups which is often overlooked. At the end of such a group it is possible that some problems remain unresolved and some people are left in a state of agitation. Far more contact is possible between members of a continuing group, between sessions, than is possible with the non-continuing group. Individual meetings or mini-groups can be arranged to deal with problems which are urgent, or the person involved feels would be better treated in such a way.'

'Because our group is leaderless, it probably moves more slowly than others, and it does not eliminate the danger which is present when strong emotions are released. The group has largely fulfilled my wishes and I believe it will continue to enable me and others to develop and expand our capacity for living.'

'In my personal life, there has been a strong need to have someone or several people to turn to in times of crises—people outside the normal friendship and family relation range—people who would communicate honestly, openly, supportively and constructively. When this group was first proposed, for me it had two aims—an Encounter situation, without a leader, for personal growth with interaction between members of a group, and the chance to turn at times of need to others, whom I can trust, for help.'

'As it happened, both these aims have been achieved in process—the Encounter group as such gives me the opportunity of being in a learning situation, and with individual members of our Group I have had the opportunity of sharing

their problems and airing my own concerns. This sharing gives me valuable resources. The Group gives me a sense of kinship which has not been possible before with my own family or with friends. It has a completely different meaning from social contact and interaction. It has a special place in my present life and I feel privileged to be a member.'

'I do not remember the date ... but I remember the feeling ... the feeling was that for me, this was going to be an experiment in getting to know people in such a way that I could feel surer of relationships than I could in any other way. I saw it as a springboard towards more intimate living ... perhaps a communal living pattern of some sort. I didn't then know, and I still don't know enough about patterns of communal living, to know what could follow, but this was the essential point in my joining this Group. I discovered that others had different reasons for wanting to come together, but for me it's turned out to be exactly what I was wanting to do.'

'I have been able to relate with people who were not pre-selected by me, they weren't people who were necessarily sympathising with my attitudes or ideas. I think it is good for my development to be able to relate in this trusting way with people whom I mightn't have related to under any other circumstances. For me this is a very big learning situation. When I am not here I select quite carefully and I avoid possibilities of conflict, and yet here I find that conflict isn't developing because we are actually talking out our ideas and I just don't feel any sense of threat.'

'I greatly value insights into myself and others and being in this Group has promoted insights more rapidly than previously was the case I have a sense of this being my extended family and find that I have the same sort of reserve that I have with my own relatives and perhaps everybody whom I come in contact with. I tend to stand a fair way apart. When I don't ring up or contact people I feel a bit funny and guilty about it. I still have that reserve and to me it is the most amazing thing that I am not rejected I am aware sometimes of hurting people very much. I have not been motivated to move outside my own little world, so that I just don't think about contacting people. In this group it seems that I am not giving offence and not being misinterpreted This comes as a most beautiful surprise, a beautiful piece of learning about how people related to one another and what the really essential things about relating are. It is not the superficial thing of how often you make contact but the way the contact has been made, and I love it. I think ... isn't that beaut, isn't that a valuable thing for me.'