

[This is a slightly updated version (January 2012) of an article published in the journal:  
*Psychotherapy and Politics International*, Volume 6, Issue 3, Pages 212-225, October 2008  
 Online ISSN: 1556-9195, Print ISSN: 1476-9263, Copyright 2008 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.  
 Published Online: Sep 24 2008, DOI: 10.1002/ppi.173, <http://www.interscience.wiley.com>.]

## **BRINGING DEEP DEMOCRACY TO LIFE: AN AWARENESS PARADIGM FOR DEEPENING POLITICAL DIALOGUE, PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS, AND COMMUNITY INTERACTIONS**

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**Key Words:** *worldwork, process-oriented psychology, deep democracy, politics, awareness*

### **Abstract:**

*Democracy in its traditional form is exercised in part through voting, majority rule, laws protecting minority viewpoints, and the freedom to listen to all voices. However, democracy is rarely something that we consciously manifest in daily life -- whether during political debates, community meetings, personal relationships, or in our internal lives. In this article I describe a few communication methods that make it possible to bring an even deeper form of democracy to life in our moment-to-moment interactions. This new form of democracy, based on basic awareness principles and methods, can be used by leaders, group and community facilitators, and anyone who wants to become a "participant-facilitator." The framework I describe is derived from process-oriented psychology, its group process application, called worldwork, and its philosophy of deep democracy. I show that without awareness of our moment-to-moment overt and subtle, dreamlike signals democracy is a dream that has not quite happened. With greater awareness political debate as well as community and personal dialogue can transform into more co-creative and deeply democratic interactions. I also speak about a new kind of leader who can be ordinary and one-sided as well as bring awareness and openness to the various people and levels of any interaction. To make my point, I use examples from large group work, the recent presidential race in the United States, as well as personal interactions.*

### **Introduction**

While watching recent presidential primary debates in the United States, I found myself hopeful and at the same time dismayed. While aspects of the dialogue gave me a sense of optimism, many parts of the debate were filled with conventional political rhetoric to which I had become accustomed. Well-worn tendencies to gain power, to win over voters, and to discredit one's opponents were conveyed in the typical fashion of many democratic political discussions around the world. I was hoping to see a candidate who would use a few principles of awareness to both stand strongly for her or his beliefs and at the same time would also be an elder who could facilitate the interaction and relationship between all parties. I saw some glimpses of this and hoped that one of the speakers would model even more fully, a new and deeper form of democracy-in-action.

It was easy for me to project my disappointment onto some of these leaders. Yet, as I stepped back from my dismay, I began to look at myself. I realized that no matter

how much I cherish and use my awareness in my work as a therapist and conflict resolution facilitator, and no matter how much I strive to live the spirit of democracy in my own life, I often forget many of my abilities when I am personally involved in a heated political debate or an intense discussion with friends. I realized that, though awareness is a central guiding post for many therapeutic directions, it can be quite unusual for people, even those highly trained in psychology, to use their awareness while talking and interacting in personal relationships, community discourse, or political debate.

Certainly none of us wants or needs to be a facilitator all the time. That would be unrealistic and unnatural. However, I longed for a world in which it was possible, when needed, to shift from a more superficial form of democracy based on voting and majority rule, to a lived experience of a deeper democracy in moment-to-moment interactions. I decided to write this paper in order to speak about awareness and a few simple communication methods that anyone can use to help bring this deeper democracy to life.

The theoretical and practical background of this work comes from process-oriented psychology and its group process application, called "worldwork" (Mindell 1992). Both were developed by my husband and partner, Arnold Mindell<sup>1</sup>. Arny's work suggests a deeper democracy that focuses not on the act of voting or only on the stated issues or goals of any particular group or political dialogue but on the moment-to-moment awareness of the background feelings, dreams, and subtle communication signals of all participants. Deep democracy brings democracy to life *in the moment* as a living reality. In deep democracy, everyone "wins" in the sense of gaining more meaningful relationships and more sustainable resolutions.

Although it may seem odd to some to focus on the dreamlike background of interactions, it is not unusual. Many forms of psychotherapy focus upon the influence of background feelings, memories, emotions, and dreams on everyday life. Many business people today know that in order to generate greater teamwork, brainstorming, and new ideas among employees, it is important to take time to drop out, relax, and play games. Many scientists and artists speak about getting to the limit of what they are able to do or understand, then needing to relax and dream to let new and innovative ideas bubble up to the surface. People have always gone to religious or spiritual practices to find something to sustain them in their work, knowing that remaining only in everyday reality is not sufficient to bring meaning to life's events. All good social activists have had some dreamland spiritual experience supporting them in their social change work. And, throughout history communities have used ritual, dance, and music to express and come to grips with the larger field of community life and the cosmos.

In this paper I describe a few skills of worldwork that anyone can use to capture this dreamland dimension that coexists with all overt interactions. I also speak about a facilitator or leader who can be both a one-sided and fallible human being as well as an elder who can use her or his awareness and heart to care for the whole; to understand, support, and help process the diversity of people and levels of experiences that she or he encounters. This person could be an identified leader in her or his community, a politician, an organizational consultant, a therapist, or most

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.aamindell.net/>, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arnold\\_Mindell](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arnold_Mindell) and books in the bibliography.

importantly, any one of us who wants to become a “participant-facilitator” (Mindell 2002) in her or his daily life.

My viewpoints are derived from my work as a process oriented therapist, teacher, and group facilitator. They also arise from teaching psychology and doing conflict resolution work with Arny over the past 25 years with diverse populations, and often with groups in intense and seemingly intractable conflicts in many parts of the world. Some of the places we have worked include Japan, Australia, India, South Africa, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Russia, Ireland, Slovakia, and South Korea.

### **Background: Process-Oriented Psychology**

Process-oriented psychology (also known as Process Work) was developed by Arny in the late 1970s and 1980s in Switzerland. Arny’s original work with individuals led him to the discovery of the interrelationship between dream images and body symptom experiences, also known as the “Dreambody” (Mindell 1982).

Process work is based on the idea that processes contain their own inherent wisdom. Even the most intractable relationship problems or body experiences contain a great deal of meaning and wisdom, hidden within what otherwise might seem like intolerable events. In order to unfold the details of any particular experience, it is important to notice our everyday approach to experiences as well as the *dream-like* or *unknown background* aspects of those events of which we are not quite aware. Only when all aspects of an experience are unfolded with awareness does the wisdom embedded in the experience reveal itself most fully.

For example, in his book, *Working with the Dreaming Body* (1984), Arny showed how body symptoms that disturb us can be relieved by focusing not only on the medical or causal understanding of the symptoms but also on the secondary or unknown dreaming aspects of those body experiences. For example, if I have a sharp pain in my stomach, medicine may be helpful and relieving in my immediate daily life. At the same time, getting to the quality of “sharpness” and using it in some way can be very important, resolving for issues in my life, and potentially relieving for my symptom as well.

Over time, the basic philosophy and methods of process work expanded into such realms of application as working with people in near-death and comatose states, relationship and family work, extreme and altered states of consciousness, movement processes, all forms of creativity, and physics.

### **Worldwork**

In the 1980s Arny realized that, while individual therapy can be extremely important and helpful, and while couple and family therapy can be very useful, they are not sufficient if people leave the therapy room and go out on the streets and are shot at or find themselves in some other political, social, or cultural turmoil. Each individual, family, or relationship is embedded in a larger world with varying degrees of conflict, challenges, and problems. Therefore, Arny began to develop another aspect of process work aimed at working with small and large groups, organizations, and open city forums. He called this approach “worldwork.”

Since that time, the philosophy and methods of worldwork have been applied in many localities, venues, and countries around the world: in schools and universities and community meeting rooms to deal with such issues as discrimination; in open city forums focusing on such issues as race, gender, sexual orientation, aboriginal

land rights, environmental catastrophes, and health disparities; in organizations focusing on organizational change and change management; in law enforcement training; and in war recovery and trauma work. (See, for example, Arye and Audergon, 2005; Audergon, 2004; Diamond, 2008; Lattin, 1992; Morin, 2006; Reiss, 2004; Schupbach 2007.)

A central goal of worldwork is to use awareness to notice and give voice to the whole field in which we are living and its parts. A worldwork facilitator enables the parts and polarities to flow with one another in order to create a more enriching and sustainable community that is best for all.

### **Deep Democracy**

Arny realized that democracy is, in essence, a dream still trying to happen. His concept of "deep democracy" (1992) states that *awareness* is needed to literally bring democracy's most cherished beliefs and ideals to life both in the private and political arenas. Without awareness, political discourse, social action, community meetings, and city forums run the danger of striving for outer change while potentially replicating history. For example, I can speak about the need for openness and freedom towards others while dominating a conversation and not listening to anyone! Without awareness of this momentary behavior, I can perpetuate, on a small scale, the very behavior against which I am struggling.

Awareness helps us embrace all aspects of our experiences. It makes it possible to notice and bring into discussions not only the most overt issues and facts of a given situation or dialogue but also the background feelings, dreams, and visions that, if kept hidden, tend to disturb any attempt to create sustainable reconciliation or resolution. For example, laws can be passed to outlaw racism or other forms of discrimination, yet if our hearts and minds are not changed as well, and if we are not aware of the subtle ways in which we influence one another in our moment-to-moment interactions, then even the best laws can only cover over deep-seated conflicts and wounds (Mindell, 1995, p. 41).

### **Inner Democracy**

In individual life many of us strive for a democratic attitude toward our inner processes. However, most of us are not really democratic inside of ourselves (Mindell, 1992, 1997). All of us keep out or ignore parts of ourselves that we feel are bad, naïve, undeveloped; those parts that do not go along with our momentary identity. This marginalization is quite natural and is one of the main reasons people seek out a therapist's help. A deeply democratic attitude focuses our awareness so that we notice the way in which we side with certain parts of ourselves, including those feelings and issues with which we are identified, whereas we marginalize those that are more hidden and unacceptable.

### **Democracy and Power**

Traditional democracy is based on the distribution or balance of power. The emphasis on "power" can inadvertently support a mentality based on fighting and winning. Typical discussions between political parties often mirror this stance by focusing on *beating* the other candidates, being *tough* on opponents, showing greater *strength* or *intelligence*, and above all, *winning*.

We need to evaluate the efficacy of emphasizing power as central to democracy. Recent conflicts around the world have, in fact, arisen in direct connection with "democratic" elections. A BBC "Newsnight" program at the beginning of 2008 stated:

“In Pakistan people are being killed in the run-up to February's elections. In Kenya they are being killed in the aftermath of December's elections. In the United States, beginning tomorrow in Iowa, the world's most powerful democracy will begin to choose its new leader - a leader who will follow George W. Bush, whose attempts to export democracy to Iraq have caused him such trouble.”

I am reminded again of a presidential primary debate in the United States. The topic of the Iraq war was hotly debated. While speaking about how to deal with the war and the efficacy and timing of potential troop withdrawal, all crucial topics, there was a palpable war-like atmosphere *on the stage*. This perception was echoed in various newspaper and magazine articles that described the *war-like* atmosphere. (See, for example, Kornblut & Balz, 2007)

Most of us have had enough of a battle or war mentality, whether between nations, religious ideologies, or within our own personal relationships. Many long for something deeper, a deeper democracy. We need people who can stand for their opinions strongly, who can be both inside and outside of the fray at the same time; elders who can support diversity, deepen interactions, and use their awareness to bring about meaningful and sustainable inner and outer social change.

Consider the above example: A candidate in the midst of a debate who uses her or his awareness might notice the war-like atmosphere and address it. In one of our private conversations, Arny suggested that a leader in such a situation might say something like, “The way this conversation is going on this stage tonight, everyone is beating each other up. I want to fight it out about who is right or wrong, better or worse. But frankly, we have enough war. Let’s stop it at least on this stage. War makes good movies, but it doesn’t make a good lifestyle. Let’s try to work together and model a new way of interacting. Together we will certainly be able to find a way to stop outer and inner wars.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Worldwork and Levels of Awareness**

The philosophy and practice of worldwork recognize that there are various dimensions of experience within every group interaction. Every group (and individual) has a *consensual reality* (i.e., a set of assumptions, beliefs, and perceptions that is held by the majority to constitute reality) *as well as* another *dreaming* reality or dimension that is ordinarily unseen yet lies behind the known consensual reality. This dreaming dimension includes all of the feelings and dreams hidden within our more overt communication. Without training, groups and individuals tend to focus only upon that with which they identify as real and therefore they miss important subtle aspects of communication. In contrast, the values of deep democracy suggest heightening our power of awareness to notice and flow with the various levels of experience that arise in communication. A worldwork facilitator brings all levels of experience to bear upon the momentary issues. It is only when all dimensions of reality are recognized and acknowledged that the wisdom of the relationship, group, or community emerges. Here is a short description of the three levels of awareness that comprise deep democracy. I will then describe a number of methods that anyone can use to bring deep democracy to life.

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<sup>2</sup> In this discussion the “war” is a ghost role. See further on in the paper for a description of ghost roles.

**Consensus Reality.** Every group, community, or nation has a “Consensus Reality” – the view of the world that it defines as real and to which most people give consent as reality. In politics, consensus reality and its issues and facts are the main point of focus. Issues concerning economics, health care, the environment, education, Social Security, military spending, etc., are all aspects of consensus reality as well as the facts, history, people involved in any issue, differences in rank and power, legislation, etc.

**Dreamland.** In the Dreamland level of worldwork, a group is experienced not only as a group of people discussing pressing issues but also as a *field* with a particular atmosphere. Every political debate, group interaction, or relationship situation has a particular atmosphere; it is tense, heavy, lighthearted, aggressive, etc. Within that atmosphere we find all of the unexpressed beliefs, background feelings, hopes, visions, dreams, and body signals that are not “consented upon” or generally recognized, but which lie in the background of, and strongly influence, all interactions.

In addition, the field or atmosphere of a group is filled with various *roles* or polarities that are in relationship or tension with one another. The various positions, parts, and sides of an issue that seem static and set in the concreteness of consensus reality (that is, belonging to particular individuals, candidates, or groups) are actually mutable *roles* that are shared. That is, the roles belong in some way to *everyone* involved. Therefore, as we enter Dreamland, each side of an issue, each position and feeling, can be represented by many people. Hence, in Dreamland we enter into a more *fluid* realm in which we all share the various positions and roles of the group or community.

Everyone knows what it is like to express a particular role in a family, group, or political discussion and then suddenly feel compelled or pulled to switch and represent another position as the dialogue unfolded. If we use our awareness to consciously *switch roles*, the overall field becomes more fluid (i.e., not rigidly affixed to particular individuals, groups, etc.). Both the field and the roles begin to transform. A good facilitator can use her or his awareness to notice and support the way in which people switch roles consciously or unconsciously during any process. As the process becomes more fluid, the interactions and roles deepen. For example, in a meeting in which students and teachers were discussing problems at a university, a student complained that the teachers were not solving the difficulties. As she continued speaking, she began to talk about some quick and helpful means to solve the problems. The facilitator realized that this student had switched into the *teacher role* and asked the student if she would like to switch roles. As that student stepped consciously into the “teacher” role, she found a new sense of pride in her own knowledge. At that moment, one of the teachers realized how relieved he was to listen to this new “teacher”. With encouragement from the facilitator, the teacher switched roles and occupied the *student position*. He said that he had been feeling a heavy responsibility to clear up the problems, but that he was now relieved to listen and learn new approaches. The field became more fluid, more dynamic, and the original issues were more easily resolved.

In addition, a facilitator can use her or his awareness to notice *ghost roles*—those people, events, or things that are spoken about in a group but that no

one is directly representing (e.g., you and your friends are discussing Barack Obama in your living room; since he's not physically present, he is filling a ghost role). Noticing ghost roles can be a key to conflict resolution. I will say more about this later in this article.

Worldwork helps us take a step back and see that the roles into which we fall in group discussions are not only personal but appear all over the world. Arny calls them *timespirits* (Mindell, 1995). Everywhere we find those who are oppressed and the oppressors; the poor and the rich; those fighting for civil rights and those attempting to maintain the status quo. Over time the names for these roles change, but their underlying spirit remains quite similar. As individuals switch roles in the Dreamland level, roles themselves begin to transform, as each of us becomes an active member of our changing and evolving world.

**The Essence Level.** This level is host to the deepest, subtlest feelings, visions, and dreams behind any given feeling, role, or part of a group. When someone touches upon this essence level, speaking very deeply about her or his feelings and dreams, it frequently touches everyone and brings a sense of unity or common ground, at least for that moment in time. A politician, who is able to express the deepest roots and feelings behind his or her overt political beliefs, will have a greater chance of actually touching others, including those people on opposing sides.

Now let's consider a few skills that arise out of the awareness of these levels and that anyone can use to bring deep democracy to life.

### **Role Switching and the Debate**

Role switching is not merely a technique; it actually happens all the time unconsciously. For example, imagine a business meeting in which some of the employees feel afraid and undervalued by the powerful and directive boss. At another moment, one of the employees gets quite upset, begins to point a finger at the boss and says that he or she has a better idea about how the business should run. In that moment this employee has switched roles into the "boss" position. At the same time, the boss begins to look defensive, becomes afraid, and feels undervalued. In that moment, the boss has switched roles and is now feeling like the "employee" role that is undervalued. A skilled facilitator notices and brings to awareness the way in which such roles have automatically switched.

Conscious role switching is certainly not typical behavior in political debates. But let's imagine, for example, that a candidate realizes that she suddenly has similar views as her opponent. Such a candidate might notice this role switch, stand firmly for her position and at the same time speak about the way in which she has switched roles. She might say, "I believe in my position very strongly and feel it is the best one. At the same time I realize that your viewpoints are also mine in some small way. At times I also have those feelings and ideas that you suggest. In any case, I love the dialogue and together we'll be able to create a better world."

### **Ghost Roles in the Debate**

Noticing "ghost roles" or third parties that are mentioned in a conversation but *not directly represented* by anyone can be a simple and potent method for deepening any social or political discussion. If I talk about someone else for a long period of time, that person is not only outside, in consensus reality, but also a part of me that

I do not know very well. That (ghost) figure will appear, at some point, in my own behavior, perhaps in my subtle communication signals. In other words, anything that is spoken about for a long time is part of the speaker's psychology that she or he doesn't know very well and that will appear in the present in some form.

In one of the Democratic presidential primary debates, numerous comments were made about the "bad administration" or "George Bush." Bush was described as someone who just goes for what he wants, pushes people around, and doesn't listen to others. While all of this can certainly be true in the outer consensual level and needs to be addressed as such, we can also add a touch of awareness to deepen the conversation in the moment. Since George Bush is not physically present, he is a ghost role. Therefore, we might ask, "How is that ghost appearing *right now* in the conversation?" A very awake and aware speaker might notice the moment when she or he has fallen into that "pushy" ghost role and say something like, "I notice that while I speak about Bush and his pushy behavior, I am also becoming the role of Bush right now in the sense that I want to push my agenda ahead and don't want to listen to your feedback! I intend to beat you and do not care how you react. So let me stand for that pushiness right now and say that I think I have the only right opinion here, and I don't want to have to listen to you! And now, after saying that, I feel more open to hear what others have to say."

### **Ghost Roles and TV**

Of course, ghost roles do not only occur in political debates. They happen all the time at home! Remember the last time you watched TV and became irate, bored, or even made fun of what you felt were "inept" or irritating speakers, leaders, or politicians. If you were to use your awareness, you would notice that those "politicians" are a ghost role in the moment. That is, those politicians are a part of you, the onlooker, as well in some even minor way. Otherwise, you would not react so intensely to them. For example, imagine that I become upset about the views of a fundamentalist person and the way in which he or she dogmatically and unequivocally states his or her opinions. It is important to value my own viewpoint. However, if I continue to go on and on about that person, it would be interesting to ask myself in what way I might be a "fundamentalist" in my own views. That is, in what way am I sticking to my ideas to such an extent that I won't listen to others?

### **The Leader as a Role**

Similarly, while great attention and emphasis are placed on the overt leadership of an organization, city, or nation, in deep democracy the concept of the leader is understood as a *role* that is shared by all. The moment that we say that we want *our leaders* to do a better job, to make better decisions, or even applaud their leadership, we are also acknowledging, however consciously or unconsciously, that those leaders are also a ghost role *inside* of us, a part of each of us that wants to step into her or his own leadership potential. In other words, the role of the leader is a roving position that anyone who is aware of what is happening occupies at any time. With so much tension in our world, we need to recognize this tremendous resource: We all have the potential to be both recipients of the political process as well as leaders of our communities.

Noticing the leader as a role can help bring deep democracy to life. Here is an example. In a country recently liberated from the hands of a dominant and repressive regime, a particular company wanted to create a system of equality between its board members. This desire for equality was in direct reaction to the oppressive brutality of the earlier political rulers. During meetings, whenever they



would begin to talk and try to make decisions, they found themselves in a deadlock, unable to come to any resolutions about their problems. It seemed that no one would step forward to make a decision.

However, upon closer observation, the “leader who knows what to do” was a ghost role, present throughout the meeting in subtle communication signals. Whenever someone suggested a particular resolution, someone else would have a *better idea that would serve to foil* the first person’s good suggestion. This pattern continued for some time. At various moments, an individual covertly “took control,” showing that she or he was a wise and powerful leader who had the “right” solution. This could not be done overtly because the group had decided from the outset that powerful, directive leaders should not exist!

With awareness, someone in the group could notice that the leader is a role that is filled by many group members for brief moments; it is not a fixed or set position occupied by one individual. Each person could then be encouraged to *temporarily switch roles* and occupy that “leadership position” when she or he had a good idea to put forth, and could likewise step *out of* that role when she or he was done.

### **Gossip**

Another way that we can all bring deep democracy into our lives has to do with something that we do all the time. Gossip! Just notice who you talk about a lot when you are gossiping with friends. Catch yourself saying that the others are beautiful, stupid, insensitive, etc. The *other* person or group that you are speaking about is part of the dreamland background of your communication. Then consider how *you are that person or group* in some way, however small. This simple approach can have very transformative effects and close the gap between you and the often ominous “other.”

### **Double Signals in Communication**

Noticing *double signals* that occur in Dreamland—those body signals with which a group or individual does not identify in the moment—can be a crucial step towards finding sustainable resolutions based on awareness, whether speaking in a political debate, group conflict interaction, or during a personal relationship. In one group conflict situation, I remember a man who was very angry about a particular topic and said that he wanted to confront those who put him down. However, at the same time that he came forward to speak, he was looking at the floor. When he consciously embraced this double signal, he put his head down, paused, and said that he was actually hopeless that anything good could come out of the conversation. In fact, he had already given up. If this signal was not acknowledged or understood, it would linger in the background and impede any chance of the outer confrontation completing itself.

### **Getting to the Essence as Participant-Facilitator**

Deep democracy can also manifest in a subtle and powerful way when someone is able to express the very *essence* of what he or she is feeling, whether during group interactions, political dialogue, or personal relationships. We have seen many times that when someone gets to the essence of an experience, it often has the effect of bringing all participants to a common ground or sense of unity. The group does not have to stay at that unifying level, but such an event can bring a momentary sense of renewal that can contribute greatly to working together for sustainable change.

I remember a memorable example of the way in which a participant in a group transformed the atmosphere through his essence-level leadership. This occurred during a workshop Arny and I facilitated in Oakland, California, together with our colleague, Wilma Jean Tucker, in 1992, just before the trial that would ultimately acquit the policemen whose beating of Rodney King had been seen around the world—an acquittal that then sparked race riots throughout Los Angeles. The extreme tension and almost violent conflict between the black and white participants in our group escalated to the point that the police, who were present for security purposes, began to shift nervously around in the room. At some point, at the height of the tension, an African American man standing in the corner began to plead: "Accept our rage, accept our anger, but don't forget to love. This is not black pain or white pain. This is our pain. This is my pain. As long as anyone is hurting, I am hurting." And at that moment he began to wail so loud, with such great feeling and agony, and for such a long time, that the people who were arguing stopped transfixed. One by one, every group member turned and slowly moved toward that man, and each began to wail as well. Everyone was wailing, singing. That man brought us to the essence level, the deep feelings that were buried within the conflict. After much time and great feeling and connection, the group was able to go back to the original conflicts and deal with them in a new and poignant way.<sup>3</sup>

This example shows the power of one person, who allows himself to tap into the essence of his experiences and the community's tensions, to facilitate, from his participant position, tremendous *unplanned change*, bringing everyone in the room to a common ground of human suffering, which then served as a basis for deeper understanding and further work.

### **Rank**

One final way that all of us can help to bring deep democracy to life is by using our awareness to notice differences in rank. *Rank* refers to the amount of power that a person has relative to others in a given situation. Ordinarily, we tend to think of rank in terms of the amount of social rank that we have.

However, in worldwork theory, rank is much more differentiated. Arny notes:

Although the central social powers are economic class, race, religion, gender and age, there are many other powers that, once brought out, help create balance. I am thinking of the personal power of storytellers, elders, wise people and individuals with psychological centeredness, compassion and so forth, who change history through their presence. (Mindell, 1995, p. 21)

Let me briefly describe four types of rank. *Social rank* refers to the amount of power a person has relative to a given culture or society. Some measures of social rank include economics, health, gender, sexual orientation, religion, race, and education. *Psychological rank* refers to a type of power connected to a feeling of centeredness even in the midst of difficult situations. If used well, someone with psychological rank can help relieve tensions and facilitate problem solving. If used without awareness, a person with a great deal of psychological rank can make others feel put down for being "off center" or "disturbed." *Contextual rank* refers to the rank an individual has relative to a given situation or context. For example, in a work situation the boss may have a lot of rank. However, if the boss is a woman, she may experience low rank in everyday society in terms of gender. Finally, *spiritual rank*

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<sup>3</sup> This situation was reported in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, in an article entitled "Mediators Target Hot Spots," in 1992.

refers to the sense of power that comes from a sense of being connected to a greater source, a connection to something divine. Someone with spiritual rank can bring a great deal of wisdom and eldership to interactions. Spiritual rank can also give us a feeling of having justice on our side; of being in the "right" whereas others are "wrong." If used unconsciously, this sense of justice can turn into a stance of superiority toward others. If used consciously, however, it can bring an uplifting and spiritual connection between people. Some of the world's most marginalized people have had low social rank while having a tremendous amount of spiritual rank. With that rank, they have managed to overcome even the most dire circumstances and have risen to become powerful leaders of their times.

While it is crucial to try to equalize rank so that some do not suffer at the hands of others, history has shown that we will most likely never get rid of rank differences all together. Every society creates a cultural norm in which certain types of people and behavior are deemed more important than others. As early as elementary school, children begin to create ranking systems based on whom they like, what is "cool," and what is not. Knowing this basic human reality, the best use of rank is to become aware of and use it consciously for the benefit of others.

### **A Mixture of Different Forms of Rank: Example**

In any interaction there may be a fascinating and complex mixture of rankings happening simultaneously. Here is an example of the mixture of rank differences and the way in which greater awareness of rank was transformative.

In a recent open forum on an environmental conflict in a U.S. city that Arny and I facilitated, the environmental activists spoke about their low social rank in terms of a lack of power to change government policies, whereas city officials obviously had a lot of social rank to make and carry out policies and decisions. At one point in the forum, some of the environmentalists spoke about a street protest in which they had participated some days earlier in the downtown business section of that city. They had been very angry and wanted to show their opposition to what was happening. About thirty minutes into the forum, a police officer who had been assigned to stand guard and protect the storefronts during that protest spoke up. He said that in his heart he understood the environmentalists' side. However, he had to do his job. He needed to feed his family.

After speaking for a couple of minutes, he went silent. There was a long pause. Finally, he began to speak again. He said that he was aware that he had a lot of power as a police officer and yet during that protest march he became very afraid. As the protestors came toward him en mass, he was terrified. He tried his best not to show his fear at that time and simply do his duty. He was palpably shaking and quite embarrassed.

As he spoke, the atmosphere shifted dramatically. A moment of understanding occurred. Many of the environmental activists realized that, though this man had a lot of social rank due to his position as a law enforcement officer for the city, he had low rank in terms of that particular situation and context. Similarly, they realized that while they had low social rank in respect to that given issue, their great numbers and their sense of justice gave them a lot of spiritual and contextual rank in that particular situation. After that realization and interaction, people began to speak very personally and a deep and meaningful dialogue ensued.

### **Developing Eldership**

I have described a number of skills such as noticing roles, role switching, ghost roles, double signals, and rank. However, deep democracy is not a matter of skills alone. It is a matter of feeling, a deep feeling connected to the elder inside of each of us who is familiar with the various parts inside of her- or himself and also knows or intuits the diversity of viewpoints and roles in the groups and communities that she or he encounters.<sup>4</sup> This elder can be both an ordinary person with her or his own standpoints as well as a facilitator who can flow with and support the interactions between all sides. She or he gives the relieving sense “having been there before” and helps to create a home for all. In so doing, this elder models the world that she or he is hoping to create. We call this deep part of ourselves our “process minds”.<sup>5</sup> Getting in touch with this part of ourselves requires personal development.

No one can be in that deepest self all of the time. It is natural to fall out of it and become identified with one part or another. In fact, we have seen many advanced and skilled facilitators lose access to their abilities when in the midst of very tense conflict. Yet, through working on yourself and becoming acquainted with that part, it is possible to gain access to your deepest self when needed. Though explicating this process of accessing this deepest self goes beyond the scope of this article, I do hope to inspire all of us to find this part of ourselves that can elder the whole.

### **A Revolution of Awareness**

As many of us know, without awareness, history tends to repeat. When revolutions occur, frequently the behavior of the groups who overcome the oppressors mirror the dictators or monarchs that they overthrew (DeFronzo, 1991). Many of us know what it is like to be filled with such vengeance that we end up unconsciously acting in similar ways as the oppressive powers we are fighting.

Although we may never get around rank differences and such roles as the oppressed and oppressor, introducing the use of awareness to notice both consensual issues as well as the roles and ghosts and deeper dimensions of our interactions could help us step out of history as we have known it. We would move from typical revolution to an “awareness revolution” (Mindell, 1995, pp. 225–241)

This revolution can be brought to life not only by those in the most obvious leadership positions, but by anyone desiring to use her or his awareness to make change in the world. Yet, who is ready for such awareness? Who is ready to notice the details of everyday life as well as the background of personal and community interactions? As Arny says,

Many of us would like the world to change, but we don't want to endure the trouble of helping make that happen. It's easier to dream of better leaders who give charismatic speeches about community or civil rights decreases or increases in military and police protection, improvements in the economy and the betterment of humankind. (Mindell, 1995, p. 18)

### **The Hidden Secret: Use Your Awareness**

Most of community life is based upon an unsaid agreement to ignore much of the field in which we are living. There is great wisdom in this selective process. It helps to maintain consensus reality and make sure that we stop at traffic lights. However,

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<sup>4</sup> The special feeling quality or attitude with which we use our skills, I call “metaskills”.

<sup>5</sup> See Arnold Mindell's book *Processmind: A User's Guide to Connecting with the Mind of God* for a detailed description of this personal development and training.

the constant repression of awareness can have dire effects. Again and again in our travels, Arny and I meet groups and communities in which past wounds have been covered over in an attempt to get on with life. This makes a lot of sense. People have had enough agony. And yet, the wound is still there, a ghost of history that is looking for some resolution. If it is not addressed, it usually arises in a less tractable form. If addressed in a useful way, it can potentially bring about greater relationship and new beginnings.

Who is willing to hold out her or his arms to our little planet of six billion people? Who can be both an ordinary individual and an elder who is there for all? Who can be, at least for a moment, an elder who uses her awareness; someone who knows what it is like to be on one side or the other; a person who also senses herself as the whole earth that cares for all? With such elders in our world, we might have a chance of making a new and deeper form of democracy a living reality.

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