

Safety As A Psychological And Political Process

Retrieved from Arny & Amy Mindell web site

<http://www.aamindell.net/worldwork/#safety>

Arny mentions safety in his books from a variety of perspectives because it is a complex issue and not just a program that can be instituted and insisted upon as it is around the world.

Safety is an experience that interests everyone. We are all living human beings, and sensitive to life and death. Vulnerability makes us all interested in safety, fear for our well being and the well being of others. We know from Worldwork experience that safety is a perception that depends upon the person's individuality, age, health, gender, sexual orientation, culture, dreams, nationality, and so forth. For example, if something is marginalized or rejected by your conscious mind, you are constantly afraid and "in danger" of a reaction from that "something" within yourself, often projected onto the outside world.

In large group and Worldwork settings, safety experiences are central issues. Mainstream people rarely feel safe because they often ignore or marginalize other people – not just inside themselves, but also in the world. So they – or we — are afraid of retaliation from marginalized people and groups they – or we – have marginalized. Marginalized groups and individuals who have been ignored or hurt by others rarely feel safe anywhere. Because of the deep democracy paradigm, in Worldwork settings all experiences are important. Deep democracy means that the experiences of those of us who have been marginalized (as well as the feelings of mainstream folks) are encouraged, even when pain may temporarily frighten some. Thus, a complex dynamic arises when one group or individual explores marginalization, and also her feelings of pride, power and ability to speak about subjects which have "never" been said before. Speaking out creates all kinds of feelings in everyone. Some are afraid; others are touched so deeply, they are moved to tears. In the sense of deep democracy, each and everyone's feelings are important as part of the emerging community awareness process. This process increases everyone's sense of safety as awareness of rank and privilege, power and its abuses comes forward.

Learning to sit in the heat of such interactions is not merely a matter of reading about it. Not even good intentions suffice, as most of us know. Everywhere people are trying to learn how to create a facilitative atmosphere. This is a highly complex topic requiring as much inner work, and reflection on one's own life, as academic study of history and outer work. Facilitators must learn as much as possible about outer events and also about the truth of dreaming. She or he must learn that invisible spirits move through the air making everyone nervous, though most of us feel too shy or unconscious to voice what those spirits are saying.

The facilitator must awaken her own sensitivities to notice "dreaming,"

and the manner in which it represents itself in the imaginations of us all, in the ghosts within, and in whole nations. Her training must in some sense allow her to bring these ghosts forward, and encourage herself and everyone to play these ghosts. This work is a mixture of seriousness because of the horror and abuses of history, and shamanistic creativity because of the social, awesome elements of dreaming. Processes often switch from seriousness to play, from one to the other in seconds as trouble turns toward freedom and play.

That facilitator, by the grace of someone's god, manages, with her community, to raise awareness to the point where ghost roles and voices that cannot speak are finally represented. She or he can now oversee the unfolding of deep democracy. Such facilitation now makes the term "safety" seem like a totally inadequate word. Better terms for such group processes are "Community," "sense of meaning," "belonging," "sense of life's task" and perennial human goals. Such a facilitator knows that she is incapable of doing all this alone. She is in a role that belongs to the wisdom of the community. Finally, safety is the name of a process of community making, in which each of us realizes we rest upon the shoulders of our neighbors.

Our lives and deaths depend upon the other, as we rediscover, if only for a moment that we love them, even though a few moments earlier we may have feared them. But such amazing moments occur only when there has been awareness of the dynamics of interaction, where training and patience have lead us to the moment where we are all facilitating, noticing and holding down hot spots (emotional, amazing, or terrifying moments) and edges, (moments in individual life when the unknown has been marginalized).

Thus, safety laws are important but will never be sufficient. We need more than a political safety process; we need everyone's growing awareness of a deeper democracy.

Revised and extended from Arny's answer to a question about "Safety as a Political Issue" that appeared on the process work string, pw-local@yahoogroups.com in August 2000. Thanks to Phyllis Kramer.

For more on safety, see the section beginning p. 57 in Arny's "Deep Democracy Of Open Forums".