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Pathology as "Personal Growth": A Participant-Observation Study of Lifespring Training

Janice Haaken and Richard Adams

THIS paper presents an overview of a Lifespring Basic Training workshop from a psychoanalytic perspective. Basing our conclusions on a participant-observation study, we argue that the impact of the training was essentially pathological. First, in the early period of the training, ego functions were systematically undermined and regression was promoted. Second, the ideational or interpretive framework of the training was based upon regressive modes of reasoning. Third, the structure and content of the training tended to stimulate early narcissistic conflicts and defenses, which accounted for the elation and sense of heightened well-being achieved by many participants.

A major contemporary force in developing popular conceptions of the self has been the human potential movement, grounded in the premises and practice of "Third Force" psychology--humanistic psychology--which emerged in the 1950s and found increasingly widespread expression in the next two decades. The growth of the human potential movement has been both exponential and chaotic. In the realms of education and therapy it has created numerous gurus and schools and provided an array of techniques and procedures for the enhancement of personal growth. In the 1970s an effort was made by several persons and groups to consolidate various practices into cohesive packages as training programs. These widely marketed programs, designed and organized to effect significant and positive changes in the lives of participants were first successfully initiated by Werner Erhard with *est*, and are now dominated by *est* and Lifespring. The investigation presented here focuses on the structure and processes of a Lifespring training program.

For the most part, literature which is available on "human growth" companies is limited to clinical impressions and journalistic reports of *est*. Clinicians have tended to focus on psychiatric risks associated with the training for some people (Kirsch and Glass 1977). Others have emphasized its efficacy as an adjunct to psychotherapy (Paul and Paul 1978). Anecdotal reports of Lifespring graduates are often enthusiastic, lending support to the organization's strong claims for the effectiveness of its training activities. Comments of graduates range from "It changed my life" to "It was extremely valuable." However, such global reports often lack specific content.

To date, there is no published material on Lifespring other than materials which are distributed by the organization. Follow-up studies initiated by research associates of Lifespring Foundation suggest that the training increases "self-actualization" as measured by the Personal Orientation Inventory (Shostrom 1978). Although the Inventory provides an objective measure of

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the effects of the training, it poses typical scaling problems. The results are based on forced-choice questions which restrict the range and content of responses. In addition, a response bias may be built into the scale: it is heavily laden with the language and values of the human potential movement and may merely be measuring a superficial familiarity with the training ideas. As Rosenthal (1978) pointed out in his review of empirical findings on encounter groups, participants tend to overstate, often in global terms, the extent of "personal growth" achieved (p. 74).

The research upon which this paper is based was developed out of the need for a clearer and more detailed picture of the Lifespring phenomenon. The purpose of the paper is both descriptive and analytical. First, we describe Lifespring training: the participants and leaders, the structure of the training activities, and the techniques utilized. Second, we explain the effects achieved during Lifespring training from a psychoanalytic perspective. We argue that although participants often experience a heightened sense of well-being as a consequence of the training, the phenomenon is essentially pathological. By pathological, we mean that the training systematically undermines ego functioning and promotes regression to the extent that reality testing is significantly impaired. This does not imply that participants suffer from lasting forms of psychopathology as a consequence of the training. The long-term effects of the training and its usefulness to participants in facing problems in living fall outside the scope of this phase of the study.

The interpretive framework adopted here is supported by several psychoanalytic premises concerning group behavior. In discussing the relationship between ego functions and group behavior, Freud noted that "intensification of the affects and the inhibition of the intellect" characterized "primitive groups" (1959, p. 20). Primitive groups promote the blurring of ego boundaries and psychological merger with the group leader, who serves as an ego ideal for group members. By projecting ego and superego functions, e.g., the regulation and control of impulses, into the leader, members may express infantile aggressive and libidinal drives normally held in constraint (Kernberg 1980, p. 212). This psychological state may be described as regressive in that it is reminiscent of the experience of early childhood—the oceanic experience of oneness with the all-good, protective parent who mediates between the child's immediate needs and the external world.

Regression, however, does not inevitably imply pathology. From a psychoanalytic perspective, many healthy and adaptive forms of human activity, such as falling in love (Grunberger 1979, pp. 5–6) and artistic achievement (Kris 1964, p. 28), require the capacity to regress. When falling in love, one must be able to experience temporary states of psychological merger with another person and artistic achievement often involves access to impulses and irrational or primitive fantasies. In addition, the ability to work in groups or to engage in collective forms of social action requires the capacity to merge with group ideals and group interests. The critical distinction in determining pathology in group members concerns the extent of regression—i.e., the dominance of primitive fantasies or impulses and the level of ego control maintained. By ego control, we mean the capacity for reality-testing, for mobilizing adaptive defenses, for distinguishing between internal and external events, and for bringing affective states under rational control.

Many of the encounter groups of the human potential movement have been described as regressive because of their disinhibitive effects and their tendency to stress abandonment to strong emotions while disparaging reasoning and intellect (Back 1972, p. 79; Schur 1976, pp. 48–53). The emphasis upon "getting in touch with your feelings" and "getting out of your head" may be of therapeutic value in encouraging participants to gain access to previously warded off impulses, a process which often occurs in successful forms of psychodynamic therapy. However, without an interpretive framework which reconciles affective states with objective reality and logical thought processes, such group ca-

thartic experiences offer little opportunity for sustained therapeutic change and may, in fact, be psychologically damaging (Lieberman, Yalom, and Miles 1973, pp. 167–209).

The Study

The material presented in this paper is based on a participant-observation study by a psychologist and a sociologist at a Lifespring Basic Training workshop held in Seattle, Washington, in 1981. Because of the uniformity of Lifespring trainings,[1] this workshop most likely is representative of training workshops in other settings. The training took place over five days and consisted of a total of 48 hours. Participants met from approximately 6 to 12 P.M. on the three days before two all-day workshop sessions. In addition, a "wrap-up" session was held four days after the initial training. While participants and leaders were unaware of the research project, prior consent for the project had been obtained from the Lifespring Corporation and the fees were waived.[2]

Our approach was consistent with usual participant-observation methods. Because of the anticipated evocative nature of the experience, measures were taken to assure both a sufficient level of experiential involvement and sufficient analytical distance. Our reactions, as participants, were understood to constitute an important phenomenological aspect of the inquiry to be carefully noted. We decided to allow some self-disclosure (to discuss "real" problems when appropriate) but to avoid disclosure in those areas of our personal lives which were too affectively loaded to allow the emotional distance compatible with researching. Thus, we sought to achieve genuine but restrained involvement to avoid either immersion in the experience, or conversely, excessive detachment. We do recognize that our decisions about how we would react make our experiences somewhat different from those of other participants.

Although notes and taping were not allowed during training sessions, we made extensive notes during breaks and at the close of each day's session. Our discussions following each session were taped and subsequently transcribed. Efforts were made to provide a detailed account of what had occurred and to note any discrepancies in our reactions or recall of events.

The conclusions presented here are the result of a thematic analysis of the transcribed sessions. Although the conceptual framework which investigators bring to a participant-observation study structures both the particular content and the meaning of observations, we attempted to suspend previous assumptions to the extent that this was possible. Thus, our approach to the training experience was primarily inductive in nature. For expository purposes, we have subsumed the descriptive data under the conclusions drawn from our analysis of the training.

Participants

Participants paid $350 for the Basic Training, which is the first of the three levels in the Lifespring training series. The group consisted of 68 adults ranging in age from 17 to 66 years, with an average age of approximately 35 to 40. Women slightly outnumbered men. Most participants were Caucasian; there were only a few minority group members—1 Black and 3 Asians. The socioeconomic status of participants was for the most part middle-income. The majority were in sales positions, self-employed or housewives. A few were in professions such as teaching, engineering, medicine and dentistry.

The explanation given for participation in the training included the range of complaints which typify psychotherapy populations. Couples came to resolve marital conflicts. The younger participants, in particular, reported feelings of loneliness, so-

[1] We were told by Lifespring staff that the format of the training sessions, the sequence of exercises, and the didactic material were presented in a systematic, scheduled manner. This was also confirmed informally by reports of participants who had previously taken the basic training.

[2] Although a written consent was obtained from Lifespring Corporation, we have protected the privacy of participants by altering all identifying information except that concerning ourselves.

cial isolation or a lack of direction in life. Others said that difficulties with jobs or personal relationships brought them to the training.

Although Lifespring provided a preliminary questionnaire to screen out those who were under psychiatric treatment and emphasized that the training was educational rather than therapeutic, the promise of a rapid cure for these various complaints was unmistakably an attraction to the participants. Thus, an important motivational basis of the training was the expectation that dramatic change would occur. Most participants learned of Lifespring through the recruiting efforts of friends and family members who were Lifespring graduates. The promise of "personal growth" held out by the organization and zealous graduates was both nonspecific and unlimited. As we waited for the workshop to begin, a high level of anticipatory excitement was created by the expectations of the participants, the mystery surrounding the training, and the laudatory comments of friends and family members who mingled with the group. As participants were finally ushered into the training room, Lifespring staff and supporters applauded enthusiastically, indicating that something quite important was about to take place.

The Leaders

The staff for the training consisted of one leader, or "trainer," who was a paid member of the Lifespring staff, and eight volunteer assistant leaders who had already completed the series of Lifespring training workshops. The trainer was a conventionally attractive man of about thirty. He was tall, dark, even-featured and meticulously attired in dressy sports coat and tie. His physical appearance projected a Madison Avenue image of success. His training in leadership and communications prior to his Lifespring training was as an IBM sales representative.

The assistant leaders were in charge of various logistical aspects of the training such as leading small group discussions and monitoring various experiential exercises. They also conducted much of the follow-up contact with participants after the training. Most of the assistants were employed in sales or managerial positions.

Diminished Ego Functions and Regression

As with many of the encounter groups and sensitivity training workshops of the 1960s and 1970s, the structure and content of Lifespring training had a disinhibitive effect. Reasoning and intellectual processes were minimized while affective states were intensified. However, Lifespring differed from these prototypical groups by the extent to which the leaders took control of ego functions for participants. The environment was elaborately structured, much as a compulsive parent would do for a small child. During the early training sessions, chairs were meticulously arranged on rows of masking tape facing the podium, where the leader stood with large paper tablets for didactic instruction. If a chair was moved, the participant was instructed by one of the assistants to return it to the taped line. The theme song from *Star Wars* was played ceremoniously at the beginning of each session, and participants were to be seated in their chairs by the conclusion of the music. Frantic compliance to this rule was remarkable even though its purpose and the consequences of noncompliance were unclear.

The trainer began the workshop by discussing the purpose of Lifespring, writing "personal growth" and "personal awareness" in bold letters on the board. Awareness was defined as "understanding things as they are." The trainer emphasized that the answers were already within us—it was just a matter of discovering them. "Everything has always been available to you. It's a matter of noticing it, of awareness." This nativistic approach to knowledge was dramatized by a banner across the front of the room which "grew" in size each day. The enigmatic phrase which spanned twenty feet by the fifth day was "What am I pretending not to know?"

Following the introduction by the trainer, the group discussed the various mo-

tives for coming to Lifespring and how to achieve "full value" from the training. The key phrases which described the vehicle to personal growth were "submission," "100 percent commitment," and "spontaneity." This emphasis upon submission and total involvement required some attention to resistances—the doubts and reservations which participants inevitably would experience. The trainer moved to a discussion of "how we avoid," drawing from the audience examples of avoidance behaviors such as forgetting, sickness, and daydreaming. The question was posed, "What stands in the way of creating maximum value for yourself?" By the end of the first evening, the trainer had explained emphatically the major contingency for achieving the expected transformation: complete submission to the Lifespring experience. By the device of identifying resistances as "ways of avoiding," participants' questions, doubts and concerns were labeled as obstacles to personal growth.

A variety of rules for "playing the Lifespring game" were then reviewed, and participants were asked to stand to indicate agreement with them. While all groups are guided by implicit or explicit rules, the Lifespring rules were notable for their emphasis upon obedience to the instructions of the trainer and their arbitrariness or lack of an apparent rationale. The effect of a prolonged discussion of the rules, which included some challenging questions by participants, was to fortify the position of the trainer as a legitimate authority who was in control and to diminish the participants' control.

Audience responses were managed in a way which reduced the ability of participants to think critically and simultaneously inflated their self-esteem. In order to speak, participants had to stand, be acknowledged by the leader and speak into a microphone. The audience was to applaud after the person finished speaking, presumably indicating support for the "risk of sharing." The experience of having to speak before a large group, hearing one's voice amplified and being rewarded with applause was undoubtedly useful for those who were fearful of public speaking. However, since the applause was mandatory, it was not an indication of the quality or coherence of participants' comments. The trainer acknowledged as valid only those audience responses which confirmed or illustrated a point being made. Over the five days, responses came increasingly to mirror the idiom of the trainer, and the applause became increasingly enthusiastic. This essentially distorted and magnified the import of what was being said, undermining reality testing. For example, midway through the training, one participant stood and announced elatedly, "I've got it!" Considerable applause followed even though there was no explanation about what he had "gotten."

What was rewarded by the trainer was compliance or pseudocompliance. Participants who offered critical comments or who suggested a different way of conceptualizing a problem had their statements dismissed, were subjected to ridicule or were confused with paradoxical logic. The "dissenter" was generally maneuvered into some form of compliance before being permitted to sit down and receive the applause.

An example of this type of interaction occurred on the first evening after the "Trust" exercise.[3] Instructions for this exercise were as follows: Participants were to mingle, and when eye contact was made with other participants, one of four comments was allowed: "I trust you," "I don't trust you," "I don't know if I trust you," or "I don't care to say if I trust you." The participants were then to move on to the next person without further comment. After regrouping following the exercise, one participant challenged the implicit reasoning behind the exercise; as the exchange below indicates, his reaction was dismissed without legitimizing the rationality of the question that he raised.

JAMES: I'm not sure what this had to do with real trust. I mean, it's not an all or nothing thing—like "I trust you" or "I don't trust you." I would trust someone with my car before I

[3] Many of the Lifespring exercises will be familiar to those who have participated in encounter groups.

would trust them with my child, depending on how well I knew the person.

TRAINER: Are you willing to consider the possibility that you don't know what trust really means?

JAMES: (*Appearing confused and hesitating*) Yes.

TRAINER: Thank you. You may sit down. (*Audience applause*)

The trainer used a variety of techniques to neutralize comments which challenged or qualified the point being made and maintained sufficient control over audience responses to assure that defiance and critical thinking were not publicly rewarded. The use of confusing "double talk" was particularly effective in disarming those who threatened to delegitimize the trainer's position. Statements such as "What you think isn't is, and what you think is isn't," or "Well, what is the answer?" were perplexing enough to cause the participant to falter in uncertainty. The suggestion that the participant was disturbed, confused, "avoiding," or "game-playing" were other tactics used to discredit objecting participants.

As the training progressed, participants became increasingly reliant upon the trainer to interpret reality. Defenses and the capacity for critical reasoning were undermined by both the structure of the training and the responses of the leader. Typically, a didactic session followed each experiential exercise, providing an interpretive framework for the feelings evoked. The trainer provided attributions for the heightened arousal which was generated by the exercise.

A form of exercise used repeatedly throughout the training involved highly structured interactions in pairs. Each member of the pair faced the other in the "open position" (legs uncrossed, one hand placed on each leg), and eye contact was to be sustained for the entire exercise. If participants deviated from this position–for example, by breaking eye contact or crossing their legs—the assistants instructed them to resume the open position. We found that the experience of having our movements monitored throughout the five days (while being told to be spontaneous) was particularly unsettling, evoking feelings of powerlessness and dependency. The prolonged eye contact required in all pair exercises had a certain hypnotic effect in that it became increasingly difficult to withdraw from the influence of the exercise.

A number of dyadic exercises which reenacted parent-child relationships were included in the training as a means of resolving conflicts through brief, intense encounters with parent surrogates. These exercises also contributed to the regressive pull of the early phase of the training. The first involved one partner standing and assuming the position of a parent while the other gazed into his/her eyes from the perspective of childhood memory. As feelings of infantile helplessness in relation to a powerful parent were evoked, participants displayed more childlike behavior, such as giggling and eager compliance to the trainer. Another exercise required that one partner attempt to gratify all the childhood fantasies of the other—fantasies of what the perfect parent would have provided.

IDEATIONAL THEMES AND REGRESSION

On the second evening during the didactic session, the ideational content of the Lifespring message was reviewed elaborately with the use of diagrams. The trainer began with a discussion of "how we respond to events." He argued that by "resisting events" or "attempting to change them," people merely rely on prior belief systems or "automatic" ways of interpreting the world. This way of responding is a reactive one which ties people to the experience of the past and to unrealistic expectations for the future. The trainer emphasized that "coming from a position of change never works," On the other hand, "submission" to events and acceptance of things as they are results in "creative choice," "awareness," "joy" and "growth." The paradox of this implicitly conservative message was that personal control was promoted through submission or surrender to the existing reality of the trainer.

The following interchange took place as one of the researchers attempted to chal-

lenge the logic of the presentation, using the language and categories provided by the trainer.

JANICE: Part of what you're saying matches my experience and part of it doesn't. I can see how in some situations conflict is made worse by reacting on the basis of rigid, unrealistic expectations. Yet, in other situations—like the women's movement or other social movements—those who resist are the ones who create change. For those who submit and back away from conflict, no change takes place. Also, beliefs can limit us but they can also sustain us at times. The belief in justice or equality, for example, can provide hope for another way of cooperating in the world. There needs to be some distinction between rational and irrational or infantile beliefs, here.

TRAINER: Your problem is that you're stuck on the level of analyzing and beliefs. You're hung up on having to analyze everything.

JANICE: I thought that this was the time for that— the didactic period. Isn't that what you're doing on the board? Am I wrong? (*Some audience laughter*)

After the audience laughter the trainer removed his chart, displaying some irritation, and began a new chart entitled "Levels of Awareness." He started with "belief," stating that this was a low level of human awareness; he then discussed "analyzing" and "experimenting." He distinguished these three low levels of awareness, which presumably maintain the "illusion of certainty," from "experiencing and observing," which are unfettered by belief and lead to "natural knowing." By stressing that "all beliefs are arbitrary," the trainer promoted a radical devaluation of the external world. This solipsistic view of the world, which presupposes a presocial self, contributed to the general tendency of Lifespring to cultivate regressive modes of reasoning.

Although there was often an element of truth in the trainer's arguments, the extensive use of all-or-nothing categories, absolutist logic and magical thinking distorted what would otherwise have been reasonable points. Ideas were not presented as problematic beliefs which were open to scrutiny but as transcendent truth—"natural knowing." The critical eye of the participant was turned away from the content of the training and toward him/herself as the source of all knowledge.

Infantile Omnipotence and Identification with the Leader

After participating in a variety of regressive exercises, participants came increasingly to identify with the trainer and to share his power during the third and fourth days of training. Shifting from the emphasis upon submission and trust, the trainer suggested that we were totally responsible for all events in our lives—"100 percent accountable"—including the selection of our parents. An exercise designed to illustrate the theme of "taking full responsibility" involved the use of pairs. Partners were to tell each other of an occasion when each had been victimized. Several people told stories about having been beaten by a parent as a child. We were then instructed to retell the story from a position of 100 percent accountability—in other words, how we "set things up to be that way."

This exercise transformed the infantile helplessness which participants had experienced earlier into infantile omnipotence. Many participants reported feelings of elation and expansiveness following this exercise. The level of insight gained was akin to the reasoning of a small child who has not yet cognitively overcome an egocentric view of the world—the conviction that all events emanate from the self. The subjective experience of liberation which accompanied this exercise seemed to stem from the sense of omnipotent control generated among the participants. The group was particularly vulnerable to this type of primitive reasoning because of the effects of the earlier training. The lowering of inhibitions, the extensive structuring of the environment and the undermining of critical thought combined to elicit archaic defenses such as omnipotence.

Identification with the powerful position of the trainer as a defense against infantile helplessness and dependency was made evident by the increasing reliance upon his language over the five days of training. The language of the human potential movement, which provided the "official" lexicon

of Lifespring, seemed to exhaust and encompass all of human experience, e.g., "getting off automatic," "going for it," "taking risks," "taking responsibility," and "creating your own reality." These phrases took on an almost magical communicative power within the group.

As the training progressed and the trainer's words were repeated by group members, the trainer became softer in his style and more accessible to the group. His occasionally stepping down from the podium and mingling with the group allowed a greater sense of psychological merger with him. Our collective seduction was dramatically enacted on the fourth day as participants took the position of the leader on the podium and "shared" the growth which they had achieved thus far. Laura, an attractive and articulate woman of about thirty, who had been the first participant to object to a rule on the first evening, approached the microphone. Her voice trembling, she began to explain how socially isolated she had become and spoke of the barriers which she had erected to keep people at a distance. The trainer then asked if she would be willing to try an exercise in "trust." The lights were dimmed and the woman stood on a chair ready to fall backward into the arms of six men selected from the audience. As sensual music played, the trainer stood close to her, murmuring in intimate tones. Finally she allowed herself to fall, and the men began to rock her back and forth to the music. The trainer remained close to the woman, who was now sobbing, massaging her stomach and speaking softly to her. The exercise was quite poignant, moving many participants to tears. Although the surface meaning of the exercise concerned trust, it was compelling in its libidinal and religious undertones. There had been a series of testimonials followed by the "baptismal" of a formerly recalcitrant participant. She had fully immersed herself in the experience and had finally yielded to the trainer.

The desire for merger, which is reminiscent of the security and total dependency of early childhood, has been identified in various psychological phenomena, e.g., falling in love, religious experiences, and intoxicated states. However, what we found particularly troublesome in the various trust exercises presented in Lifespring was the implied indiscriminate nature of trust. The desire for intimacy was gratified instantaneously. It appeared to matter little whether or not the object of desire was trustworthy. The emphasis was upon abandonment to an undifferentiated, unknowable other who existed as an extension of one's own needs.

An essentially solipsistic view of the world was supported by the experiential and ideational content of the training throughout the five days. While reactions to others always contain projective themes, at Lifespring the boundary between inner and outer reality, between self and other, was constantly being obliterated by the structure of the training. This contributed to the sense of expansiveness and boundless power experienced by participants. The idea of "mirroring" was used in several exercises as a metaphor for projected reality. "What you see in others," we were told, "is a mirror of yourself."

Exercises which mobilized narcissistic defenses, i.e., feelings of inflated well-being and exaggerated personal power, were alternated with attacking exercises, which were narcissistically injurious. The latter evoked feelings of shame and worthlessness and made the group vulnerable to the judgments of the leaders. One example involved a game called "Red and Black," which required that the group divide into two teams and develop strategies, based upon a set of rules, for achieving the greatest number of points. Neither team was able to recognize that the main contingency for getting the maximum number of points was that both teams succeed. Essentially, if one team lost, both lost. And both teams did lose. This exercise could have been an occasion for discussing the cultural context of competition and aspects of our society which make it difficult to identify cooperative contingencies. Instead, the trainer castigated participants, finally stating with disgust, "You all make me sick." Since the exercise was at the close of the evening, we were to go

home and reflect upon what we had learned. Many participants were silent and tearful as we closed the evening session.

By assuming the position of a harsh and rejecting parent, the trainer was able to mobilize infantile feelings of badness. This experience made it more likely that participants would attempt to defend against feelings of being a bad and powerless child in subsequent exercises by identifying more strongly with the leader. The tendency to identify with him in order to share in his power was particularly evident on the morning following the Red and Black exercise as 8 or 10 participants lined up enthusiastically on the stage to give testimonials. This was the first time in the training that participants were invited to join the leader in his elevated position on the stage.

During the final two days of the training, there was a great deal of hugging and other indications of affection among participants. However, these expressions of "love for everyone" seemed to be narcissistically motivated; they were an extension of the expansive mood and feelings of power experienced by many of the participants rather than an expression of mutuality or attachment. Another group exercise, based on an assembly line model of human relations, illustrates the indiscriminate nature of intimate overtures. Participants assembled in two concentric circles, facing each other. Each facing pair was to simultaneously indicate one of four possible gestures of intimacy: no contact; a handshake; holding hands; or an embrace. After completing this brief, silent interaction, the lines shifted and new pairs were formed, repeating the procedure. Most pairs embraced so that by the conclusion of the exercise, close contact had been made among the majority of participants.

While this exercise may have been helpful for those who fear physical contact, providing a form of desensitization, it stripped such interactions of the relational context which generally gives them meaning. Instead, it became a rather compulsive, counterphobic reaching out which provided little information concerning problems of intimacy. These fleeting physical contacts were experienced as if they had profound human implications.

Pseudo Self-Awareness and Reality Testing

The events of the fifth and final day of the training provided an opportunity for participants to use what they had learned in responding to an unanticipated crisis. Following the morning break, one of the more actively involved participants, Patrick, leaped up and took the position of the trainer on the podium. Initially it appeared that Patrick was acting out against the trainer by mocking him and by ignoring rules. However, it soon became apparent that he had decompensated—his speech was incoherent, he was out of contact with reality, and he appeared to be hallucinating. The trainer approached him and told him to stop "game playing." His "other choice" was to "go to a place where they allow people to play crazy games." Patrick merely gazed vacantly at the trainer and continued to mutter Lifespring phrases. Various participants responded by encouraging Patrick to "go for it" and "let it all out." They did not understand that he had already "let too much out." His apparently fragile defenses had been repeatedly challenged by the trainer, who had often accused him of "bullshitting."

When it became clear that Patrick was unable to pull himself together, the other participants were asked to leave the room. We gathered outside, initially stunned by what had transpired. Then the group coalesced into a "circle of love," initiated by several members, out of the desire to "send Patrick our energy." The group was clearly attempting to provide comfort to its members in an upsetting situation. What was remarkable was the level of denial and misinterpretation of what had occurred. The group transformed Patrick's psychotic episode into a positive experience by using the categories of reasoning provided by the training. Drawing upon the infantile omnipotence encouraged by earlier sessions, some of the participants declared that "we are going to heal Patrick—he'll feel our

energy." Others commented cheerfully that "he is getting in touch with his feelings" and "whatever he chooses is right for him, it's the very best for him." After Patrick had been spirited away, the group reconvened to continue the training. What could have been an occasion for discussing what had happened, including the impact of the training on Patrick, instead stimulated an outpouring of testimonials.

Since the group's idealization of the trainer was potentially undermined by this incident, decisive defensive operations were necessary to prevent the eruption of hostility in the group. The group felt impelled to reaffirm the goodness of Lifespring and to externalize and redirect the bad feelings evoked, which were potentially directed toward the trainer. Hostility was deflected from the trainer, who received the uncontaminated affection of the group, onto one of the participants who had remained outside the "circle of love." This participant, one of the researchers, had been a symbol of resistance throughout the training by asking questions and at times disagreeing with the trainer. During one group exercise, he had been selected by half of the participants as the "least attractive" person in the group. He was offensive to many participants for being "too analytical," "rigid," and "not feeling enough."

In the wake of the morning's events, affective states were intensified and a mood of hysteria was palpable. While loving feelings were directed toward Lifespring, the hostile component of what had been evoked was now directed more intensively toward the participant-researcher. One participant stood and stated, "I've got something to say to Dick. You know, I really hate Dick!" Another participant charged, "You don't give your love, Dick. All I want, Dick, is for you to love. And you hold back your love!" When Dick explained his reactions to the events of the morning, various participants shouted out angrily, "You're coming from your head, stop analyzing, come from your heart."

Within the narcissistic framework constructed by the training, the use of infantile splitting—dividing the relational world into "all good" and "all bad" objects—emerged as a dominant defense against anxiety in the group. In order for the Lifespring experience to be taken in, it needed to be idealized as an all-good object. The trainer could not be questioned nor the content of the training challenged. Participants whose opinions deviated from the trainer's were seen as a threat to the feelings of elation and well-being enjoyed by participants. Such threats had to be actively defended against in order to preserve the fantasy of omnipotence cultivated within the training.

Conclusion

We have argued that while many participants experienced a sense of enhanced well-being as a consequence of the training, these experiences were essentially pathological. First, ego functions were systematically undermined and regression was promoted by environmental structuring, infantilizing of participants and repeated emphasis on submission and surrender. Second, the ideational or interpretive framework provided in the training was also based upon regressive modes of reasoning—the use of all-or-nothing categories, absolutist logic and magical thinking, all of which are consistent with the egocentric thinking of young children. Third, the content of the training stimulated early narcissistic conflicts and defenses, which accounts for the elation and sense of heightened well-being achieved by many participants. The devaluation of objective constraints upon a person's action promoted grandiose fantasies of unlimited power. A corollary to this devaluation of the external world was that interactions with others lacked substance. People appeared to be interchangeable so that ephemeral, indiscriminate emotional contacts were experienced as profound and meaningful. Identification with Lifespring necessitated considerable idealization so that any threat to this experience was aggressively defended against.

Our methods had an effect on our experience of the training and on our conclu-

sions. The Lifespring Basic Training, which demands full participation and rejects the legitimacy of observation, provided a particular challenge to the participant-observation method. In the Lifespring milieu any evidence of observation became evidence for the need for further "growth," for getting away from analysis or "intellectual trips." Lack of full emotional involvement in the training thus set the authors apart from the group and led us to experience the training differently from the rest of the participants. As a result, we are not qualified to speak from the point of view of the "average participant." We did not, to use Lifespring's words, "get the training."

However, as participant-observers, we did share some of the group's subjective experiences, particularly the extraordinary pressure to conform. In this instance, the context of participant-observation, which as Rabinow (1977) says is dictated by "observation and externality," provided us with the opportunity to note the lengths to which the trainer was willing to go in attempting to achieve the required submission and commitment which we have described in this paper. Thus participant-observation, although a research strategy not suited to fully integrating the researcher into the Lifespring Basic Training, did prove to be invaluable for developing insight into the processes of that training.

We have not addressed the normative implications of the training nor the extent to which participants are prepared by our culture to respond positively to Lifespring. The ideational content of the training would be less persuasive, perhaps, if beliefs concerning the autonomy and power of the individual were not deeply embedded in the prevailing ideology of American society. Growth organizations seem to be capitalizing upon the erosion of traditional means of supporting these beliefs and of anchoring individual identity. A deeper understanding of this phenomenon would require an analysis of the sociohistorical context out of which it emerged and from which it has gained its legitimacy.

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