

THE WESTERN PSYCHOLOGIST

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VOLUME 4, NUMBER 2

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Positive Disintegration and the Group Movement

“Third Factor”, “Positive Maladjustment”, “Disposing and Directing Center”, “Syntony”. These words are part of the vocabulary of the theory of Positive Disintegration. Are they just so much psychological jargon, obliterating old ideas behind a smokescreen of new vocabulary? No. It is the author’s conviction and the theme of this paper that the theory of Positive Disintegration has much to offer the practice of psychology today, especially the group movement.

First, what is the theory? “Positive Disintegration” is a theory of human development proposed by Kazimierz Dabrowski, visiting professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Alberta. Dabrowski’s theory is basically developmental. It views human life as a process, a becoming, a growth toward more conscious, autonomous and empathic levels in which the developing person becomes more and more outward-turning, more and more caring, more and more concerned with helping others realize their personalities. This puts Dabrowski squarely in the humanistic mainstream along with Rogers and Maslow. But what is it, within this tradition, that makes Dabrowski’s contribution unique — that gives it special value?

If we understand the special meaning Dabrowski reserves for the word “personality” we realize we are in the realm of the ideal person, autonomous, authentic; what gives Dabrowski’s ideas their unique value is his approach to the developmental process by which these higher levels of personality are attained.

Dabrowski does not believe that all mental illness, personal conflicts and breakdowns are necessarily bad. He says, in effect, that if neurosis, critical breakdowns and stress are looked at in terms of personality disintegration, they may admit of re-integration on a higher level of personal development. The theory of “Positive Disintegration” proposes what its name implies — the possibility of personality disintegration being something positive, growthful. It says that neuroses, crises, even borderline psychoses may be opportunities for development, depending on the factors at work in them, especially the psychological make-up of the individual involved.

Dabrowski goes so far as to say that such disintegration is essential for human development, that a man cannot grow without some form of disintegration, and he cites example after example from history of human beings we respect for their maturity, and shows how, in all cases, there is evidence of what is commonly labeled "mental breakdown".

To understand what kind of person it is that benefits and grows, not in spite of mental illness, but *because* of it, we must delve into the special vocabulary of positive disintegration theory.

The first distinction to be made is already implicit in what has been said: not all disintegration is positive; some is clearly negative. Some neurotics, some people in crisis, disintegrate and remain disintegrated or chronically ill; others put themselves back into a state of integration no better than they were before.

Dabrowski sees "disintegration" as a term "used to refer to a broad range of processes from emotional disharmony to the complete fragmentation of the personality structure". (1964, p. 5) Disintegration may be part of the life cycle as in adolescence or menopause or it may come from accidental crises such as illness or death of loved ones. Disintegration may be unilevel or multilevel. Unilevel disintegration is more primitive, generally on a single structural and emotional level; higher levels of consciousness are untouched and reintegration is usually at a lower level. On the other hand, multilevel disintegration touches consciousness, higher levels of personality structure and leads to secondary integration or personality growth.

Perhaps the best example of unilevel disintegration is Archie Bunker in "All in the Family". He is an insensitive, well insulated individual. Nothing important ever gets through to him. People are constantly challenging his narrow, bigoted ideas, but he can't even see there is anything lacking in his humanness. About the only problems that really worry him are someone trying to gyp him out of money, or if Edith serves him the wrong kind of beer, or if someone takes his favorite chair. Multilevel disintegration on the other hand is exemplified by a man like Jean Vanier whose deep, human concern for the retarded causes him to go and live and work with them.

What is it that makes the difference between the person who is insensitive to the challenge of crises or who fails to benefit from them, and the person who grows, not despite, but because of the crises and disintegration in his life?

To answer this in Dabrowski's terms we must use his own words. We are already familiar with the traditional distinction between heredity and environment and classical psychology has thoroughly discussed these as the two shaping forces of personality. Dabrowski introduces what he calls the "Third Factor". It is the factor of autonomy which operates over and above the other two. It is responsible for choice regarding

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certain ideas, values, and dynamisms and leads individuals toward greater authenticity and autonomy. Such positive growth potential may express itself in psychic over-excitability of both emotions and imagination. These two forms of over-excitability give individuals the potential to react creatively to the problems of life, and the capacity to see new possibilities and to want to pursue them — to change and make new.

This changing and making new may well involve the person's own psychic make-up and not just the environment around him. He sees that he must develop characteristics within himself of a psychological type quite different from what he is accustomed to. He strives for personality integration. For example, a person who is naturally an introvert may see the need for, and strive to be more out-going and social.

But, whatever the particular problems of each individual, he who would set out on the road of authenticity must be prepared, if he is to use his potential, for both collaboration and collision with others. Life, in other words, involves positive maladjustment. Authenticity requires it.

Positive development is strictly connected with the development of what Dabrowski calls the psychic inner milieu. The presence of the psychic inner milieu is a characteristic of people of accelerated development. It involves a group of internal dynamisms which are in mutual collaboration or conflict in the development of personality. These dynamisms can be divided into three main groups:

1. Multilevel, spontaneous disintegration such as dissatisfaction with self, guilt and shame.
2. The second group of dynamisms organizes the process of multilevel disintegration. For example: increased self-awareness and knowledge of the many levels of one's own personality. This is self-observation for the sake of self-development which Dabrowski calls "subject — object in oneself". The third factor is particularly operative here together with creative dynamisms, self-control, sympathy and empathy, combined with positive maladjustment.
3. The third group is composed of dynamisms of secondary integration. For example: responsibility to self and others, autonomy, authenticity, self-education, autopsychotherapy, and increased identification with others.

In the light of all this, it appears that many of the traditional goals of psychotherapy such as "adjustment" to society in the conforming sense and the suppression of emotionality are not goals of therapy at all, but only stagnating placebos that can kill growth and creativity, cutting off the potential contribution of gifted individuals to the human race. It indicates that differentness can be truly creative that "mental illness" far from being something to be quickly labeled by the psychiatrist and treated with drugs that will suppress its symptoms, can be, in the proper conditions, something that will lead to psychic growth and personal integration.

Even though Dabrowski emphasizes self education and autopsychotherapy, it is the author's contention that the group encounter is a very apt situation for positive disintegration and development toward secondary integration.

The group encounter is, in itself, a crisis. Even for those who join the group without any particularly evident neurosis or problem in their lives, the very fact of encounter with other human beings and the demands they make on the individual to reflect on his intra-psychic make-up are challenges to take one's life apart and rebuild it on a higher level. Those who run groups know how many individuals are attracted to the encounter situation because they are dissatisfied with themselves, have feelings of shame, seek the realization of some kind of ideal self. These are states of mind, Dabrowski points out, that are most apt for positive disintegration; in fact, the essence of positive disintegration is the active pursuit of an ego ideal. It is evident then that the group encounter situation by its very nature as a challenge to all who participate and by the kind of people it can attract is fertile ground for positive disintegration.

The group by its nature has another quality which makes it apt for realizing the kinds of things Dabrowski has in mind. Dabrowski emphasizes the making of good choices. He does not mean "willpower" in the sense of merely having a special faculty within oneself, but in the sense of openness to others, to take counsel, and (without blind conformity) to take disciplined decisions. Hence the group encounter provides the occasion for a "return to community" with its subsequent recovery of order, realism, stability and joy in life.

However, lurking in the background of the group movement are some very real dangers that threaten the possibility of true positive disintegration.

1. One is that the group encounter will constitute only disintegration. This can happen for two reasons: first because the group encounter tends to attract those who are chronically disintegrated, neurotics who have a low level of potential, the "groupies" who go from weekend group to weekend group, enjoying the weekly tear bath and the emotional jag that may go with it but without any real potential to creatively put their lives back together again on a higher level. Secondly, the group encounter may involve only negative disintegration because of the ineptitude of the group leader. To help people expose themselves, to disintegrate is one thing and relatively easy. To help people discover their potential and the guidelines for growth that might be found in their lives is another. For example, Dabrowski points out the importance of establishing a hierarchy of values that will lead a person to act in higher levels of empathy, sympathy and concern for others. If the leader is lost in his values, if he is confused or unaware of the need, how can he help others discover direction in their lives?

2. A second danger is that people attracted to the group encounter are disintegrated but not truthfully so. It became a superficial disintegration. It is all just going on, just learning to participate in the content. One can only

The astute person wanting to know the details of disintegration without any help in a group

3. A third danger is that the group encounter is the only personal growth. It is starry-eyed and superficial. It is a "high" is in his writings. It is secondary in interaction, and a trip can be a group experience of human disintegration.

4. A fourth danger is that the group encounter is the terrible label a "copy" of authentic, false who does not have of potential that the level of such a fleet would be a group ship with a group on Sunday afternoon a cop out if "help" from of his problem trying to share movement do individuals.

2. A second area in which the group movement can fall short of helping people attain positive disintegration is in that of authenticity. Positive disintegration is a call to a high degree of authenticity, to honesty to truthfulness, to fidelity of oneself. The group movement, especially after it became modish, left itself open to a kind of "phoney authenticity" — a superficial attempt at appearing authentic, but basically phoney because it is all just a put-on. By going to groups and astutely observing what is going on, one can learn the vocabulary of authentic encounter. One can learn to preface each sentence with the words "I feel that . . ." even when the content of the sentence is essentially cognitive. No one can feel *that*. One can only feel feelings.

The astute observer of encounter groups, anxious to conform, but not wanting to get hurt can quickly learn that being personal, spilling out the details of one's private life can have all the appearances of true openness without any of its pains. One can very neatly avoid being truly authentic in a group situation.

3. A third threat the group may offer to authentic positive disintegration is the danger of considering group interaction as a kind of shortcut to personal growth. People can come home from a weekend group encounter, starry-eyed, changed, on an emotional high — something comparable to a superficial religious conversion. Because of its emotional intensity, such a "high" is often mistaken for profound emotional growth. All through his writings, Dabrowski is careful to emphasize that development toward secondary integration is a long, slow, reflective life-long process of social interaction, introspection, retrospection, and prospection. Just as the drug trip can be mistakenly considered as a short-cut to mysticism, so a brief group experience can be mistakenly considered as a shortcut to the heights of human development.

4. A fourth danger to positive disintegration in the group movement is the terrible pressure a group may exert to conform. What group members label a "cop out" by an individual may well be one man's effort to be authentic, faithful to himself and authentically honest. The individual who does not go along with the group may well have sensed their low level of potential to help him. He may well have come to an honest conclusion that the level of intimacy they are demanding of him is not appropriate in such a fleeting and superficial relationship. He may conclude that it would be a greater phoniness and cop out to pretend an intimate relationship with a group of people you meet on Friday night and say goodbye to on Sunday afternoon. And what about the people who stay at home? Is it a cop out if a truly creatively neurotic person stays at home, despising "help" from people who do not really appreciate the creative dimensions of his problems? Dabrowski's positively disintegrated man is one who is trying to shake off the shackles of conformity. If the group encounter movement does not appreciate this, it may well be avoided by truly creative individuals.

5. A fifth danger is the problem of superficiality. Just as in individual counselling we find what I call "professional clients" — counselees who have been to so many counsellors they know the jargon and procedure and almost conduct the interview themselves — so in the group movement. There is real danger of thinking that if one has acquired the jargon of psychology one has grown as a human being. Being able to give instant analyses of self, but especially of others can be mistaken for honest concern. One can learn to begin sentences with the phrase: "What I hear you saying, Fred, is that . . ." And with the proper understanding but somewhat condescending tone of voice, one can sound almost like Carl Rogers himself. Some go to groups with the expectation of enjoying a kind of emotional bath. The success of a group may be judged by some in terms of the number of tears shed. For others it's the thrill of getting involved in the details of other people's lives — a kind of morbid curiosity. All these are superficial motives behind some people who get involved in the group movement.

Superficiality, painless disintegration is very far from what Dabrowski has in mind for those who go through positive disintegration. It is the painful, shattering, frightening experience of tearing away old structures and ripping off masks within oneself. It is not a superficial social experience; it is more like the dark night of the soul that the mystics went through, an excruciating battle within the self, a strain, an "agonia" as the ancient Greeks described it.

In fact, Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration is a modern psychological expression of a truth that has been known to mankind for centuries, something that wise men have had to repeat over and over for thousands of years because we don't like to understand the truth of it: the fact that there is no easy way to grow, there is no painless way to happiness, there is no ecstasy without the agony.

Nature has taught us there is no birth without pain, no springtime without fall, no life without death before it. Religion has told us that unless the grain of wheat that falls into the ground dies, it remains alone, but if it dies it brings forth fruit a hundredfold. Religion is founded on death and resurrection. The phoenix rises out of searing fire.

Freud and Fromm see life and death juxtaposed, and even a simple thing like an off-Broadway musical, the *Fantastiks*, tells us, "Without a hurt the heart is hollow".

And this is what Dabrowski is telling us — that growth, reintegration on the higher levels of personality is possible only with disintegration. He is telling us that it is necessary to have positive disintegration. It is a challenge to the group movement to create positive disintegration for human development.

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