

Contacting the Numinous and Creative Work at the Edge of the Unknown in a Systems-Centered Therapy Context

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Abstract

In this article the author distinguishes different levels of the unknown. After the hierarchy of defenses has been sufficiently worked through, there is a quality of the unknown which emerges which the author distinguishes from earlier levels by calling it the numinous unknown. He connects this level with the creative ground of being, the mystery which is the seed bed of all human possibilities. When group members touch this level of experience there is a nonverbal knowing that consists of a direct contact with an inner and outer perceptual field that is not yet organized, contains all dimensions of the human experience in a potential state, and touches many polarities simultaneously. The ability to experience, and in a sense to contain the uncontainable at this level of the unknown, seems to be the context for working in phase three of group development, in the container role, as well as a requirement for the leadership role. The author also notes that the numinous unknown will often first emerge and be organized in preverbal images, movements and sounds rather than words. This observation has led the author to work in a variety of creative modalities as part of the ongoing work of a systems-centered therapy group. The author then presents one specific creative project, a visual and poetic exploration of the force field, which can be easily adapted to a variety of systems-centered therapy contexts.

Authors Note

The subject of this article, while theoretical in essence, is based on my experience as a member of a systems-centered therapy group, as a member working in a containing role, as a leader of systems-centered therapy groups, and as a creative artist. For this reason I have used either "I" or the more inclusive idiom of "we" and "our", rather than the objective third person, even when talking theoretically. My intention here is both to include my own experience in this exploration and to refer to the larger subgroup whose members resonate with these ideas and experiences. If you do not belong to this subgroup, and feel offended by the use of "we" at some point during the article, my apologies.

The primary goals of systems-centered therapy are to create an appropriately permeable boundary between

the comprehensive, cognitive understandings of the world and the primary, nonverbal, apprehensive knowing which is based on emotions and sensations and to modify the cognitive, somatic, discharge and role defenses which restrain human beings from living in their center with full authority and authenticity (Agazarian, 1993, 1996). When the boundary between our comprehensive and apprehensive experience is appropriately permeable, we are in touch with our external environment without distortions and undefended from the experience of inner truth. The apprehensive world of emotion and sensation brings us to the edge of the unknown, while the comprehensive world enables us to make maps and assign meaning and significance to our experiences. If this partnership is working well, feelings are signals generated by our real environment rather than by constructed realities. We are in touch with our basic, nonverbal, intuitive knowing which rests on the unpredictable edge of chaos in a dynamic balance between our inner and outer possibilities. If this partnership is dysfunctional, we generate real feelings from our explanations and interpretations of our reality rather than the facts (Agazarian, 1993). We maintain our awareness under the safe canopy of the known. Life may be miserable, mediocre or great but most importantly it is certain, and we are able to maintain the illusion that we are protected from the awesome and dangerous threat of experiencing something different from what we already know. At the most profound level, this is probably a defense against the dread of our ultimate confrontation with death and surrendering our physical bodies and attachments into the great mystery, the unknown that encompasses all that is. In the face of this great mystery which will eventually dissolve every attachment we have, there is no defense. If we are able to work through our dread of this confrontation, we may come to a deep and abiding sense of awe, an appreciation and gratefulness for every moment and a fierce commitment to live life fully in the here and now. We may realize, in a fundamental and earth shaking way, that this moment, the integrity and beauty of being present with presence in the context of our real life, is our only real possession.

The cost of denying the reality of the unknown and living in a safe constructed reality (or any other defense) is that we generate feelings based on our explanations and interpretations of reality which

become like radar responding to a ghost image rather than to a real object. If we steer our lives based on these signals we inevitably go off course. If we live too much in our comprehensive self we also lose touch with new possibilities and with the untamed magnetism of the life force. Our experience becomes generated in a closed loop and no real new information or energy can get in. On the flip side, if we live too much in our apprehensive experience without preparation and discipline, we run the risk of becoming overwhelmed and flooding with the unbuffered current of the life force. If we are not ready for this experience the results are devastating. Our circuits are blown and we have no way to integrate the experience. Balancing these two modes of knowing is a discipline that becomes more demanding as we undo each level of defense. As we progress our feeling of centeredness and inner authority has to increase to accommodate a closer proximity to the life force. This primary life force is also the root of human creativity, new possibilities and the doorway to a sense of awe, wonder and inner freedom.

There are many ways to make the membrane between our nonverbal intuitive knowing and our comprehensive, cognitive understandings appropriately permeable. To build on the techniques and the spirit of systems-centered therapy towards this goal, I have found it useful both as a member and a leader to work in creative disciplines that do not use words as an adjunct to integrate experiences which emerge in systems-centered therapy. As experiences emerge out of the unknown, different people may use a variety of modalities to organize and make sense of them before ultimately finding words. Artistic imagery, creative movement, and music are all ways that human beings create symbols that carry a multitude of meanings from the unknown into consciousness and interpersonal space. In the context of systems-centered therapy work, I have found it useful to ask group members to draw, create mandalas, work with dance or music, or make sculptures as transitional structures between the level of their nonverbal emotional knowing and their cognitive understanding. All of these disciplines can be used in very functional and important ways to support the working structure of a systems-centered therapy group. In the last section of this article I will present one specific creative exercise, a visual and poetic exploration of Lewin's force field, which is easily adapted to a variety of systems-centered therapy contexts.

At each stage of development we are confronted with the choice between living in our defenses and stepping up to the edge of the unknown. Each time we gather the courage to let go of a defensive position we loosen the armor which protects us from the existential struggle to live our lives authentically, without keeping secrets from ourselves and in real contact with our environment and each other. The progressive journey through the hierarchy of defenses prepares us for a

naked encounter with the life force, without cognitive distortions, psychosomatic tension, depression, tantrums or our habitual roles in relationship to authority and intimacy (Agazarian, 1996). The force of the unknown gets stronger with each step, until finally we glimpse the heart of the unknown, the creative seed bed of all human possibilities. I would like to distinguish this level of the unknown from the levels which we have previously encountered by calling it the *numinous unknown*. The difference is that at the earlier levels, although it was certainly the edge of the unknown for us, it was quite well charted territory in terms of what we collectively know about group experience and group development. At this level we are faced with something which by its very nature can never be charted or explained, is fundamentally mysterious, awesome and numinous. When we have followed our dread right down to this core energy we may be shaken to the marrow of our bones. This confrontation may demand that we change the deepest paradigms that we live by.

An encounter with this numinous unknown grounds us in a quality of presence in which we are able to contain many paradoxes. In systems-centered terms, we have deeply and functionally become containers and are working at the very edge of the third phase of group development. We become deeply contactful without being attached. We have access to many polarities of experience without a strong preference for any particular side. Among other things, we are able to contain both love and hate, joy and sadness, exquisite tenderness and murderous rage, and to simultaneously touch the forces of life, death and birth. The fruit of systematically undoing the hierarchy of defenses is a "beginners mind" (and body!), in the Zen sense (Suzuki, 1970), a quality of presence and authenticity which is beyond our stereotypical roles or cognitive maps. This profound awakening activates the power and authority of our center. We have finally come through the veils of our narcissism and projections and touched the vast resources of being and encountered the other with clear eyes. When we arrive at this stage we develop a mature capacity to choose. We have mastered the art of containing the feeling before our impulse to act and become acutely attentive to our responsibility at each fork in the road. This experience is both natural and miraculous, as ordinary as common sense and as rare as gold.

During the spring 1997 training weekend in Boston led by Yvonne Agazarian the group had an experience which I believe exemplifies this level of individual and group development. This particular group was rather well trained with all members except for two having substantial experience with systems-centered therapy. We also had four members working in a containing role which contributed to creating a good holding environment. Just prior to the time the group touched this level which I am calling the numinous unknown

their were two subgroups working, one which was exploring their dread and terror of chaos and the unpredictable and another which was tracking a vast, pulsing energy which was moving inside their bodies and in the space between group members. As each subgroup deepened their work, my subjective experience was that the energy in the room became profoundly magnetized and intensely alive in a quiet and centered way. At a certain point the two subgroups merged in an oceanic experience of the pulsation of energy which contained both a sense of awe (this seemed to be a transformation of the dread) and a comfortable, for some even blissful, merging with chaos and the basic life force. There was no specific emotional content which the group was exploring at this point and yet there were many different emotions which members were aware of touching as we floated in, contained, and were contained by this vast cosmic soup. There was room within the group-as-a-whole and each group member for many different polarities as members lightly touched and hovered through feelings of love and hate, a visceral awareness of both molecular and the highly differentiated forms of life, warmth and cold, and many other feelings which moved through the group in waves.

In reviewing our experience, we noticed that the boundaries at all levels of the system were isomorphically open and permeable. Occasionally a member would pop back into dread and tighten up against the energetic flow and the group would effortlessly make room for this experience before it descended into an even deeper exploration of a sense of pregnant emptiness, a pulsing space which held all human possibilities in potential. As we crossed a time boundary into surprises and learnings there was a spontaneous movement towards the floor as we all (except Yvonne, who stayed both in her chair and her leader role!) literally put our heads together and shared from a comprehensive level what it was like to experience the dimension of consciousness which we had just touched. It was as if we kept our connection with the cosmic soup by getting closer to the earth and by unconsciously making a mandala with our physical bodies which mirrored what we had just experienced.

It seems important not to become attached to any content which is revealed at this moment, for what is truly remarkable is not what is revealed but the moment of the revelation itself. In systems-centered language if our attachment to our new insight or understanding dominates us, we will slide right off the edge of the unknown, out of our experience and into the world of explanations, interpretations and analysis. If we can continue to discipline ourselves to hang out at the edge of this numinous unknown with curiosity (and manage our natural anxiety!), we may transcend who we think we are and achieve a transformation which is deeply energetic. The very fabric of our being in the world may change. We may notice a subtle and

yet unmistakable shift in our electromagnetic field, a sense of creative regeneration and rejuvenation. At this moment we have received a new dispensation of energy from the well of universal creativity. This type of wisdom is always more about presence than content. Touching and maintaining contact with this life force is our only hope to escape the prison of our repetition compulsion and the drudgery of living a mechanical life. When we are in touch with this quality of presence, nothing in life is boring or tedious. Even the most ordinary tasks feel vital and infused with an authenticity that makes us grateful for every moment of our experience.

From a meditative perspective, any attempt to possess or explain the numinous unknown is the trickery of our grasping minds. Inevitably this impulse leads to a cult or a religion in the worst sense of the word, replete with all of the dogma and the power politics that are so normal in organizational life. (Perhaps this is the reason why the mystics of so many traditions are against organized religion.) To possess the numinous unknown would be antithetical to its very nature and a confusion of the life energy with its concrete manifestations. This can become a kind of idol worship which puts us in danger of becoming attached to a ritual after it has lost its meaning or confusing the charismatic teacher with the wisdom of the teachings. The numinous unknown belongs to no-one and is about no-thing. We interface with it in the same way that we see the horizon; it is always ahead of us, and all around us! In order for the boundary between our comprehensive and apprehensive selves to remain appropriately permeable, we must be willing to constantly revise, expand and even reverse our comprehensive understanding as new information comes through at this leading edge. We must be willing to follow our hunches and trust the signals we are receiving from our intuitive selves so that we can take the risk to recreate ourselves as new possibilities arise. In a sense we contain the uncontainable by staying open and alive to the way in which an experience which is fundamentally timeless, transcendental and ineffable, touches us in a specific context at a specific moment and finds a finite and limited expression.

Creativity and the Numinous Unknown

Throughout human history, creative work has played a crucial role in helping humanity to keep the boundary open and permeable between the numinous unknown and the explained world of what we already know. True creative work helps us both individually and collectively to shift out of our old paradigms in a visceral, bone-deep way. Creative work not only helps us to integrate new experience, it is also a living symbol, filled with the energy of the collective and personal unconscious which continues to deliver new

understanding, fresh energy and vitality into our conscious awareness. As we give our creativity expression it becomes alive in a shared space where it touches and resonates with others. If our creative work is truly successful, it balances both ourselves and the viewer on the threshold between the inner and the outer world, helping us all to process our personal and collective dreams and inspiring us with visions of the possible.

In the context of a systems-centered therapy group, I have found creative work to be very useful in deepening each member's, the subgroup's and the group-as-a-whole's exploration and integration of their leading edge as they meet the unknown. Although I have done a variety of creative exercises with my groups, in this context I would like to focus on one specific exercise which is easily adapted to a variety of SCT contexts. This exercise is a visual and poetic exploration of Lewin's force field.

The project is as follows: After the group has been working intensively for some time, we break and I set out a variety of art materials in the center of the room. I then give the group the following instructions. They can either 1) make an art piece which depicts their authentic experience and the obstacles (restraining forces) they have encountered in exploring their experience so far; or 2) make an art piece which explores their next steps and the obstacles which they will have to manage in order to successfully explore their leading edge; or 3) make an art piece in which they explore only the obstacles to their authentic experience or their leading edge; or 4) make an art piece in which they explore only their authentic experience or their leading edge. In the first two possibilities, group members are exploring both sides of themselves in the same piece and containing the dynamic tension of moving forward against their resistance. The second two possibilities are simpler in that they only have to explore one side of themselves. Group members who choose one of the second two will often benefit from doing two pieces, one of their obstacles (restraining forces) and the other of their authentic experience. This project takes about half an hour to do well. I have used a variety of art materials such as found objects, old magazines, crayons, aluminum foil, confetti and tempera paint, but each practitioner must be sensitive to the materials which they resonate with and to the limitations of their working space.

When the project is complete, I give the group very specific guidelines for processing the art work. I ask them to begin by walking around the room in an open receptive frame of mind, stopping in front of each piece and taking it in without thinking too much. I ask them to notice how the energy of each piece affects them physically. Do they feel alive and energetic with the image or diffuse and scattered? What emotions get evoked? Does their eye find places to rest or is it constantly moving? Then I ask them each to find a

piece that they feel a particularly strong resonance with and to stand in front of it. I then ask them to imagine that they had made the piece. In systems-centered terms, I am asking them to find the part of themselves that sub-groups with what is being expressed in the piece. This also helps group members to disidentify from their own art work and to work on the skill of not taking things personally. When someone is ready to speak I ask them to speak in the present tense, to stay away from explanations and interpretations, and to allow their associations to flow in a poetic and perhaps even dramatic way. I also suggest that the group listen to each other with the same receptivity that they have been cultivating during the group process, i.e. noticing their internal resonances, subgrouping internally and working alongside in silence. Often this way of processing the art work is moving, and on occasion, even profound. Two examples of this type of sharing follow. In order to help you to better live these scenarios I will use the present tense to describe them. The context of both of these vignettes are a group retreat in which the group is working in a disciplined and synergistic way with practices from meditative traditions, body-oriented therapies, art therapy and systems-centered group process.

During a recent retreat a group member is standing in front of a very energetic collage (not his own) with many conflicting and opposing images pasted on it. There is an image of war and bloodshed next to a sunset over a serene desert landscape, a picture of lovers looking blissfully into each others eyes next to a devastated young woman crying over a corpse, a race horse galloping into a stormy wind next to a man sunning himself on an inner tube against the clear blue water of a swimming pool, and a beautiful sensual dancer flying gracefully through the air next to a carcass of some animal that is being eaten by worms and maggots. In the center of the collage is a radiant Buddha with yellow confetti around him like a halo and orange red flames drawn vigorously and almost violently around its base. At the very top above the Buddha's head is a skull with a flower coming out of its crown. Scattered strategically here and there are fragments of newspaper clippings with evocative headings like "The inner city erupts again, When will we ever learn"?, "A mothers agony," "Hope triumphs on the West Bank" and "Who am I," "I am....," and "I want to go home". In the spaces where there are no words or images there are vigorous marks made with oil pastel which give the whole picture an explosive quality as if it is popping off the page and over the edges of the paper. In spite of all the contradictory images and intensity the piece is quite well planned and sensitively balanced. The energy and dynamism of the composition and colors lead ones eye around the picture in a coherent and organized fashion and the centrality of the image of the Buddha creates focus and

order in the middle of the chaos. The group member who is sharing begins with a deep breath.

(paraphrased by the author) "I am a sea of contradictions, filled with energy and motion. At each fork in the road I have both sides of me available, each part potent and clamoring for attention. I am beautiful and ugly, in love and devastated, racing furiously and resting, at war with everything and everyone and filled with the serene peace of a sunset. Sometimes the past snares me and I fall into a black hole of agonizing memories. I'm filled with energy and I have a very hard time containing myself. I could erupt at any moment and yet I also know the cost of my acting out. In the middle of it all some part of me is truly serene and at peace, witnessing the whole scene. Sometimes this serenity is a mask and I can feel the flames of my own violence percolating just beneath the surface. I have to fight to keep my mind from editorializing about my experience and yet my words help me to give order and meaning to my flood of experience. I don't know who I am, and I know exactly who I am. I am dying and being reborn. The dynamic tension of my contradictions is tearing me apart and yet I am also very organized and coherent. I have lots of energy! I'm loving and hating this process and somehow I'm finding enough room in me for both my love and my hate, my sadness and my joy. I feel a lot of hope as my old self dies. There is beauty. There is ugliness. There is caring. There is blind love and hopeless paranoia. There is bloodshed and tenderness. There is life and death. There is a flower growing out of the ashes."

After this sharing there is a hush over the room. A couple of group members are visibly moved. We take a moment in silence before the next group member begins.

In the next example (from another retreat), a group member is sitting in front of an art piece (her own) which is three dimensional. There is a mound of green tissue paper on which is taped a very striking close-up of the inside of a large white lily. To the right of this is a picture of a forest in which someone is walking. The trees in the picture tower over the figure and sunlight is streaming through the branches. In front of the mound is some black tissue paper. On the tissue paper there are two feathers and six marbles, two of which are clear and four of which are black. To the left of this black mass is another scene from nature, a photograph of orange cliffs with a churning waterfall crashing through the center of it. The whole scene is mounted on blue construction paper with thin, green grass like confetti around its edges. My impression looking at the piece was of openness and mystery. I felt curious, invited into the striking images from nature, and interested.

The group member begins slowly, in a reflective, meditative tone of voice. (Verbatim) "I'm a weary pilgrim. I've come a very long way. I've negotiated the cliffs and rocks with churning waters underneath,...very dangerous, very frightening. I fell a lot.... I walk through

peaceful forests. I am surrounded with light. I climb the mountain of mystery. I am sitting on top of the mountain in peace, the essence of me reaching toward the light and daring to look over the edge into another darkness yet to travel. And as I sit there, some tears come, and they fall into the water of darkness.... I realize that the essence of me is light as a feather. I don't have to jump in and be dragged down. I can add weight as I'm ready, and when I'm ready, to go deeper one more time... [I] know that the essence is on the mountain of mystery, always there."

At this fork in the road I have the impulse to explain, analyze and interpret these words and images, as one could easily identify defenses and experiences from many different levels of group development. However, I am going to resist this as I fear that I could only oversimplify things and vector the readers' energy in a direction which might not be authentic for them. What I would like to suggest is that the reader see these examples as pieces of poetry which may change their meaning depending on the inner subgroup and phase of group development you are resonating with. In this way these words and images may perhaps begin to function as true symbols, mediating the transitional space between us and the numinous unknown, and thus retain their capacity to touch many parts of the comprehensive and apprehensive self.

Depending on our time frame and on the size of the group, I may have the group do two rounds of sharing before they move to their own work. When they finally get to their own piece I ask them to look at it with fresh eyes, as if they were seeing it for the first time. I also ask them to remember all the associations which other group members had to their work and to see if this has deepened or changed their experience of their work. Often the unconscious will communicate surprising messages in the image which we are unaware of but which suddenly finds expression in someone else's words. At the close of this process I ask the group to simply sit in silence and to feel the resonant echo of each others verbal and nonverbal sharing.

Conclusion

In this article I have distinguished different levels of our experience of the unknown. As we systematically work through each defensive strategy the quality of the unknown becomes more potent until in our most naked confrontation with the unknown we are face to face with the seed bed of all human possibilities, which I have called the numinous unknown. At this level of the unknown we become engaged in a transformation which is deeply energetic and expresses itself in a feeling of presence, centeredness and inner authority. Our being becomes instilled with a particularly acute quality of attention which is simultaneously balanced between the vast

possibilities of our inner world and the real context of our environment which we are able to see without distortion. There is no particular content to the insight which we gain at this moment, and yet it affects our approach to every dimension of our lives. This quality of being seems to be a natural result of working in phase three of group development, an extension of the container role and a requirement for working in the leadership role.

The numinous unknown is also the doorway to creative work of all varieties. In this article I have looked at how creative work can help members of a systems-centered therapy group to develop an appropriately permeable boundary between their apprehensive and comprehensive selves as they explore and integrate their experience as it emerges out of the unknown. I have also presented one particular creative

exercise, a visual and poetic exploration of the force field, which can be easily adapted to a variety of systems-centered therapy contexts.

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