

A Note on the Psychology of Groups in Our Covidian Times

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I often find it useful, when attempting to make sense out of various scenarios, to look at extremes or ideals the better to apprehend a more complex and muddled situation and arrive, perhaps, at a clearer conception of causality.

For example, I was recently told by a friend that a school kid bashed another school kid - it seemed to me as if it were typical and not highly unusual school-yard shenanigans. But when the Principal was called in to mete out justice the basher was given a reprieve because he was 'hangry'. In other words the poor school-yard bully hadn't had his Wheaties and as a consequence he indulged in an act of petty violence against an apparently undeserving (but well-fed) victim. Therefore it wasn't deliberate malevolence or caprice at play, but malnourishment - the hunger's the thing that led to anger and thus to a bloody nose or blackened eye. The basher-bully was exonerated of all responsibility, probably rewarded with a candy bar to compensate for his state of malnourishment, and all was right in the world of the grammar school once again.

But I asked my friend a simple question: does every hungry person assault someone? Is hunger at the root of all evil?

I recall many times when I have been hungry, thirsty, anxious, aggravated, irritated, worried and distraught, and perhaps I may have glowered at a pedestrian daring to step into the hashmarks of a crosswalk as I was cruising along, or perhaps I may have uttered an icy 'thank you' to an innocent barista serving coffee, but I can't remember gratuitously tackling somebody whose looks, for one reason or other, I didn't like just because I wasn't at my utmost physical best.

Even in states of extreme inebriation there are some who will go wild, and others who go mum, so unless a person has been pushed to the *non compos mentis* brink, personal agency

- and personal responsibility - are always at play.

As I have grappled with the question of groups and group psychology since the covid debacle was introduced and lent it greater urgency, given the strange and harmful turns groups took, I have found it useful to look at groups with which I have had a direct personal experience, and which themselves represent ideals.

To begin with groups abound, everywhere. They can't be avoided and we can't avoid being included in them somehow. Chat groups, condominium associations, sporting teams, platoons or battalions of soldiers, boards of trustees, groups spontaneously formed, groups gathered together for a brief time, groups more enduring - they are inescapable and take on a multiplicity of forms and possess a multiplicity of degrees of power or influence.

As we, on our side of the covid fence, well know, groups emerged that sought to exclude and punish those who didn't go along with the plan to accept a highly dubious injectable. And also, as we well know, it wasn't hunger that made them angry at us. What was it? What galvanized such energetic hostility and lack of respect? Did the jabs soften or alter their brains or consciences? (N.B.: The Nazis of the 20th century hadn't received a covid jab). Was it a collective psychosis?

Many have come forward with explanations for the explosion of highly irrational and highly malicious trends and behaviours. Here I wish to tack aslant and look at the example of a group whose activity and goals are not only benevolent but enriching and enlightening: a Chorus.

Many years ago, in the late Seventies and early Eighties, I was a member of a choral group that had the wonderfully good fortune to sing some of the most magnificent music imaginable: Beethoven, Brahms, Bach, Haydn, Mahler - with one of the greatest symphonies of the time, The Philadelphia Orchestra, conducted by the likes of Ormandy, Abbado, Giulini, Bernstein and others.

Participating in the final movement of Beethoven's *Ninth* at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia and Carnegie Hall in New York remains one of the highlights of my life.

For me it was a dream come true to join and contribute to a group united in the common goal of artistic truth and beauty. But what were the elements underpinning such a group?

For one, *the whole was unquestionably greater than the sum of its parts*. There were very many highly accomplished and beautiful individual singers in the chorus, but the gathering of voices in a greater number and with focus created something ineffable. Indeed, many voices - like mine - were rather humdrum; but together we created a sound that, properly honed and harnessed, could send shivers down the spines of our auditors. There was no 'standing out' in a chorus, except by fidelity to the composer's score; there was no 'ego' as we are wont to say in psychological circles.

Second, what unified the chorus? Like any collection of people, motives and inclinations were varied. Some liked to be onstage, some liked to let the air out of their lungs, some liked the comfort of a large association or the thrill of a live performance. All, however, had to be united in subjugation to the realization of the wishes of the composer via the composer's interpreter, the conductor. It was the role of the choral director to prepare us for the conductor and even if the director very occasionally bristled with a conductor's

approach, it wasn't for her to object.

An ideal, a vision united us, which was the music itself and whatever lay behind and around and consequently could be expressed by the music. There were occasions when we sang 'lesser' compositions but these too required complete and selfless dedication. And who, in the end, can say what is better or worse in matters of art?

Third, we exercised power – *good power*, as I like to call it. This reminds me of another occasion when I was lucky enough to have attended a concert of Luciano Pavarotti, seated onstage behind the great singer. When Pavarotti turned towards those of us behind him, a palpable *frisson* of excitement swept through: I can't describe it otherwise than as a transmissible and very perceptible physical and emotional energy. In a large chorus something similar and even more powerful occurs. The vibrations of the human voice, the vibrations of human voices collectively assembled in musical expression, the vibrations and sonorities of the orchestra accompanying the collective vocal aspiration – these all bring one, as a singer, to a state of exultation. And when I have listened to a great chorus as a member of the audience I have similarly been transported, but not with the incomparable bristling degree as when I have been an active participant.

Therefore the essential elements in the psychology of what I call an ideal good group are: *the collective power of people who have agreed to sacrifice their individuality in service to a commonly held ideal, for the sake of achieving an ideal that could not otherwise – e.g., singly – be realized.* The ideal group brings out the very best of us, collectively speaking, but one must understand that even here individual strivings must be pursued elsewhere. There is no getting round the fact of a submission to something collectively agreed upon that is greater than one's own single self.

At the polar extreme of a good group is a group united and dedicated to mass murder. Even such a group shows the same common elements of subservience to a vision embodied by an ideal to which members submit, and in service to which members, in their collectively gained power, *may do virtually anything* – unlike choral members whose activities are narrowly defined by a score.

The key, therefore, is the uniting vision and its promise of power and pleasure to the group's participants, the realization of fantasies behind which lurks the illusion of omnipotence, immortality and ecstasy.

To understand how many millions of generally good-enough people could have succumbed during the Vax apartheid period here in New Zealand to shunning their no-jab neighbours, excluding them from society, being on the cusp of sending them away to quarantine camps or leaving them, in the paraphrased words of one notable Leftist thinker, to forage for their own food, one must understand the uniting vision.

After *at least* a year of relentless ceaseless repetitive messages from every major media outlet about the deadliness of the 'pandemic' – with a ticker-tape of case and death counts running with every video – followed by the image of an injectable panacea which, we were told, would protect, preserve and save all of humanity – it is no wonder that those of us outside that group would be treated as dangerous vermin threatening the salvation of their newer healthier world. The covidians had their own song-sheet and they were lustily singing that all men would be brothers if and only if they got the magic needle.

The promise of omnipotence, immortality and ecstasy, crafted by the most sophisticated propagandists in history in collusion with the most encompassing and centralized communications networks in history, seduced the majority, quite efficiently.

For me it has never been a question of 'mass formation' or 'mass psychosis' but mass manipulation cleverly touching the chords of our deepest desires, *which also include the desire to harm and kill and destroy*, a profound facet of omnipotence.

Great art harnesses our destructive urges by transforming them into an expression of beauty. The dark arts of propaganda unite us by providing a vision so alluring, enticing and *necessary* that otherwise good and decent people turn rogue.

In our battle against these murderous propagandists we must offer a truer vision of collective good. We cannot attempt to motivate by fear - our enemies are the experts in this.

I had lunch the other day with a local community organizer. She has been at it for decades, forming economic and service cooperatives as a dedicated 'liberal leftist'. She is now accused of being 'far right' when in reality her ideas and ideals have been as unchanging as Climate all along. We're beyond right and left, anyway, and her way forward is a way of peaceful cooperative local alliances, showing others what good will and good energy and *good power* can accomplish.

I think she's on the right track. With every battle against the covidians and our corrupt politicians - and battle we must - we must promote our own benevolent ideals. I don't see any other way.

And this is all the more important as the second phase of the New Zealand Covid Inquiry, set for November, comes into play.

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