

The Mystery and Magic of the Here and Now

Some speculations on what makes Process Work/ABS labs work

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Abstract

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This essay is in three parts.

In Part-I the author gives a gist of his view on contemporary human reality thus making a challenging and inviting case for ABS's role. It articulates the challenge at two levels, the organisational and individual. The balance of the essay dilates upon the individual level. It emphasises the role of space and time as dimensions that limit the canvas of experience – individually and collectively.

Part-II begins with the observation that the bodies that foster ABS do little by way of experience sharing or knowledge building in the field. He expresses hope that this conference will herald a new beginning. He then goes ahead and gives a picture of the challenges and resources available in constructing ABS's response to the needs of the times.

Part-III offers a new perspective – attention is everything. This is the hallmark of group work practice in ABS when we use the tool of Here and Now – effectively concentrating attention itself. He postulates then that concentrated attention creates an experience of transcending time and space thus temporarily releasing the individual perceptivity from the limitations of his identity in order to create significant changes by choice. This helps him make new and discontinuous choices – giving rise to the mystery and magic of the “Here and Now”

Contents

Contents.....	3
Prologue.....	4
Part I: The Setting as I see it.....	5
Organisation and the Individual - the Inevitables of Social Structures and the Imperatives of Personal Growth.....	5
1. Being and Becoming	5
2. Two needs, two inevitable inputs.....	5
Part II The ABS/Process Work Response.....	9
1. Who will, who can?.....	9
2. Self Reflexivity and the vision of man as the ecological being or what might well be the foundation of a truth based culture.....	10
a) The challenges.....	10
b) The resources.....	11
c) How?.....	11
Part III Attention is Everything.....	12
1. The Uniqueness of Process Work/ABS – Cornerstones of its praxis	12
2. The Science and Technology Involved	14
3. Concentrating Attention.....	14
4. Distinguishing ABS from Therapy	16
5. The Body in the Here and Now.....	18
In conclusion.....	19
Notes.....	20

Prologue

My mind goes at the very beginning a full 21 years back. ISABS had, then invited a paper in 1997 for a commemorative volume to mark its Silver Jubilee. That paper addressed the ontological question “what is Process Work” [1]. In a similar vein the present essay shows my position vis-a-vis Process Work and the Human Context. It goes on to speculate as to what actually happen when, we practitioners release the tool of studying the ”Here and Now” in our Labs and workshops. The potency and uniqueness of Process Work revolves essentially on this part of the technology in group work. I find that the tool extends our mind beyond its customary bounds of perception set by time and space as limiting factors.

Part I: The Setting as I see it

Organisation and the Individual - the Inevitables of Social Structures and the Imperatives of Personal Growth.

We human beings inevitably have to engage with other human beings as well as organisations that we make. By our very nature we associate with other human beings, we are interdependent and related throughout our entire lives.

1. Being and Becoming

The being by its very nature is a dynamic that plays out interminably by becoming something more than itself – thus aspiring for expansion or union. This is the foundation of human activity and engagement. The individual *being* thus paradoxically seeks peace (stillness or well being) as well as desires to *become* happy (gain success, that necessarily is the result of movement). The paradox lies in desiring stillness and acting in movement simultaneously.

2. Two needs, two inevitable inputs

The human being has two needs that seek fulfilment. These are, to be related with other human beings, and, to express oneself. Both needs create seeking behaviour and thus create the pull for association and desire for space to express. The individual seeks another, else the feeling of being incomplete, or, loneliness sets in.

Existence inevitably brings forth, and the being thus receives, two dynamics – inhibition and evocation – the being has no control in the matter. The child inevitably receives inhibitions in the form of “don’ts” . For example the being receives evocations in the form of say music, a sunrise etc. these evoke emotions.

These four together play out dynamically to create a canvas of engagement for each and everyone of us. These give birth to society, order, neuroses, psychoses and other pathologies,

spirituality, romance, love, relationships, organisation etc. All these are coordinated by space and time. No individual or group can command space and time in their function as limiting factors. Yet poets and artists, scientist and technologists have forever dreamt of infinity and eternity. So somewhere in our individual as well as collective imagination (psyche?) there lies a seed of eternity of time and infinity of space. The canvas of engagement however, lies framed as it were, by space and time as we conceive and perceive them.

Organisation necessarily demands structures, norms and participation in patterned relationships. Membership comes at a price. Deep inside, every individual craves freedom. The potential risks and challenges of freedom on the other hand pulls him to seek the safety that may be gained by remaining within the network of relationships.

Here now begins an endless push and pull between the inner and the outer, the private and the public, between the shrewd and the innocent – in other words between the articulated and the un-articulated between the visible and invisible, between the disowned and the owned and finally between the withheld and the enacted. The net resultant is the “dukha” in Eastern philosophy, as the pathos of being human – the inevitable sorrow of existence. I close this essay with my understanding of one way of touching the “ananda” of being in existence as well.

Relationships and the network of relationships bring with them the dynamics of power. Members therefore inevitably have to agree (silently or otherwise) to pretend not to see, as if an aspect that they are agreeing “not to see” in fact does not exist. The story of the “Emperor’s New Clothes” is an excellent illustration of this phenomenon we are all subject to. The entire citizenry had silently agreed in the story to “not see” that the Emperor in fact was only in his under clothes. It was the innocent child who shouted out the truth. He made visible what was being treated as invisible, he articulated the unarticulated.

We are here confronting the reality of power games and politics. All relationships and social arrangements are subject to this.

The struggle is thus at two levels simultaneously. The first level is the desire to close the gap between that which is happening and that which is the truth. In our example of the Emperor's New Clothes, the truth was that the king's vanity had made him blind, the citizenry throwing in its "AYE's" to reinforce and cover up the folly of the ruler. There is a truth of the situation, a truth behind the ruler's choices of action as well as the truth of his relationship with his subjects. Denial of any of these truths causes distress, causes fear. Acceptance and articulation of the truth brings instant relief and may be a desirable change. This is the social or the organisational level.

At the individual level is the struggle between the inner and the outer. This one is interior to the private world of the individual. This too is a search for higher levels of congruence and authenticity. Gaps in this domain make up the seeds of individual agony, despair, guilt and shame. Personal growth is a journey towards higher levels of congruence and synchronisation between the inner and the outer.

Organisation growth likewise is a movement towards recognising and owning up to the untruths and taking action that will create positive changes. Inevitably, the gap between the truth and the reality keeps widening with time. As such it is an imperative that organisations actively choose by design to engage in action that stem this ever increasing gap on an ongoing basis for its own good health.

Reality seems to be indicating that human society as it has evolved till date may in fact be at the losing end. A couple of sobering facts as examples – economic and technological progress has brought with it statistics that indicate significant gains, as in, there is greater wealth in the world, there are more medicines and health care in the world and so on.

Inevitably along with this progress has come the degradation of the environment and a matching increase in socio psychological disturbance – the world is continuously at war – academics have named this as the “post truth” era, where no one knows what the truth is.

It is in this setting that process work has the potential, since it is dedicated to fostering movement towards the truth. Process work has created ever widening circles of acceptance and application in initiating and fostering positive change. Although as a practice it is not “taught” in formal institutions, it has the potential to facilitate movement towards a more truth based culture.

Part II The ABS/Process Work Response

1. Who will, who can?

The ABS community in India has its own history. There are a half dozen or so non-formal organizations in the not for profit sector that foster ABS. Almost each one has its own preferred paradigm and were started by enterprising founders. Knowledge and experience sharing between these bodies of practitioners is rare. Synergizing the efforts of the various organizations would significantly multiply the efficacy and promote growth of the knowledge base and the praxis. This would obviously enrich process work and enhance its usefulness in the Indian/Asian context.

I have also encountered a degree of reluctance to theorise and systematise the emergent learning. The richness of the practice seems to satiate the practitioners. The practitioners are employed in other activities for their income, as such investing the time required for theorizing, conferences, paper writing etc. is difficult to extract. As history shows knowledge grows when shared and tossed around between several minds. I was delighted when I heard of this event and do hope that this initiative will grow in its potency.

ABS by definition is eclectic. It has been built up to begin with on foundations using knowledge mainly from Western academia. It is time to also accept influence from Eastern sources, these are replete with insights [2] and will enrich ABS enormously. ABS must become free of “Physics Envy”. Is there a case for instance that the ABS that will grow in India will have its own differential structures and contents from that practiced by our counterparts in Europe or China? Is there a case for building an emerging new understanding and then developing more inclusive procedures and practices – universal as well as local?

2. Self Reflexivity and the vision of man as the ecological being or what might well be the foundation of a truth based culture

a) The challenges

Man has forever been beset with five existential questions.

- Who am I
- Where do I come from
- What is the purpose of this world
- What is the purpose of my life
- Where do I go from here.

There are no objective answers to these searing questions. These questions are like the Cheshire cat in Alice in Wonderland, appearing and disappearing without notice or invitation. Answer them once and in some while they will appear again seeking engagement with them afresh. Responding to these questions reveals the inner philosophy as it is and can help in widening the perspective on the self, role, others, life and the world/existence.

In a slightly more agonising form come the following needs for clarification

- Why am I the kind of person I am (self clarification)
- Why has my life gone the way it has so far (life clarification)
- Why does the world treat me the way it does (world clarification)
- What do I do with the rest of my life? (aspiration, aims, meaningfulness)
- What do I do with my compulsivity? (secret struggles, often connected with the body –as in addiction)

These are part of the struggle within oneself to settle dissatisfaction accruing in one's self narrative. These deal with the ego in the processes of management of one's role identity and

have a significant evaluative aspect. They help evaluate one's choices in the light of expectations. These questions can open the door to processing existential guilt or the life not lived till now. These questions too demand reflection, contemplation and are not part of the "objective" world. Answers work best when the explorations are done with individuals in a group setting. Process work (ABS) provides methods of progressing such enquiry and generating constructive, creative responses.

b) The resources

While man is beset with these questions he has also been endowed with three wonderful capabilities. These are (a) self reflexivity, the ability to look at oneself and make changes based on that (b) envision a future and work towards that (c) an innate sense of an idea called truth and its accompaniment – a sense of that which is beautiful – aesthetics. In sum if these are put together you have a sense of integrity, a vision and the energy to move forward. A supporting capability is man's reason that permits him to explore and build upon ways and means of taking responsibility and strengthening his safety.

In addition, inherent to being human are the following two senses – mostly held without being aware (d) Identification with other individuals – "I am in you, you are in me" (e) Awareness of and identification with the collective – a sense of oneness with many –in addition to a sense of one's own individuality. These five enable imagination, aspiration and the desire to become more than what one is at present.

c) How?

Action that will help find/create the answers to such questions by promoting the qualities listed above require learning. The method for that learning must necessarily include the reality of emotions. Teaching cannot work but learning has to happen. Enter Process Work/ABS, a distinct epistemology where learning without teaching is a hallmark.

Part III Attention is Everything

1. The Uniqueness of Process Work/ABS – Cornerstones of its praxis

ABS distinguishes itself on account of its strong location in the practical world. It is founded on a commitment to reality as it exists, addressing serious problems. Most practitioners to begin with were from academia and for whatever reasons flowed with the fluidity that is inherent to the study of human phenomena. Over the last couple of decades management consultants have begun to form a significant part of the total community.

The community's aspiration and emotional tone as I have experienced it oscillates between academic aspirations and, "let us change – the world" sorrows. It receives a great deal of energy and encouragement from the experience of enhancing freedom and aliveness during its labs and workshops.

The uniqueness of ABS or Process Work does not lie in the end program euphoria, it lies in its use of groups as a setting, remaining committed to authentic new action and the encouragement it gives to self reflection - individual and collective.

Another dimension of its uniqueness lies in the use of various methods in order to concentrate the attention of all participants to issues that are important to them. This gathering together (convergence) of the attention of all members is akin to organising light such that it becomes a beam of laser. Thus deeply held emotions, physical contractions that have defied logic for decades, pathos that has been carried for generations in a family saga – all these can find release. These are only a few illustrations. History buried in the individual bodies and minds begin to become visible, making these long term problems amenable to reconfigure themselves. This "gathering together" of the attention is a unique art that is used to conduct

the labs. As our teacher Prof. Pulin Garg used to tell us, “labs are a space where private issues can be voiced and recalibrated in a group”.

The group, an essential feature of ABS practice, acquires in each member’s mind the same symbolic structure as the subjective world he lives in. His inner reality is reproduced by the group like a mirror. The group in existential fact is also a representation of the collective consciousness of which, each one of us is a constituent as well as a representative. As such the ABS group becomes a bite sized reproduction of each member’s inner world. As such the sources of distress as well as the potential solutions to these are both available in the group itself. Thus the group acquires an infiniteness in space (by size) and an eternity in time (all past and all future). The “Here and Now” tool thus acquires its potency. It creates a two layered view of the percepts, concepts and meanings each participant uses to construct his narrative. These make up the conscious mind with its preoccupations, hopes and fears. These thoughts are rooted in the past and the future. This, the narrative is the layer which he is aware of and struggling with. The second is the layer which the protective/blind side of his identity obstructs him from perceiving or cathecting with. It is like two layers of glass with a painting on each, placed one on the other. The Here and Now tool brings light into these sheets of painted glass, transforming both, by connecting as well as differentiating elements of the configurations.

All the above happens without any hypnosis or exhortation. Everybody gets into it with eyes wide open. The whole atmosphere becomes laden with shared emotions; there is intense resonance in the group. This resonance creates the laser of attention and awareness.

Now I wish to share a few speculations about the nature of this resonance across the members in the group, not only in small groups but can also be brought to life in large groups of 25 to 40 members.

2. The Science and Technology Involved

This intensified resonance with its attendant emotionality brings the group's attention strongly into the work place, the lab. It results in enormous creativity leading to unlocking old thought patterns, creation of new perspectives and is strongly founded on an experience of "I am in you" and "you are in me" across the membership. The laser like attention pierces through the egoic veil of private selves into the continuum of the collective mind.

This experience of one-ness is later described as "magic". Often times this experience becomes the trigger for some people to give up other careers and take to Process Work/ABS.

Attention is everything. Things are because they are receiving attention . Without your attention, that which you are paying attention to is not in existence. If you are interested in physics please acquaint yourself with the famous "two slit experiment" – which showed that electrons behave differently when observed in contrast to when not being observed. Your mind is caught with something (an object) because you are paying attention to it. It would altogether stop existing if you were to not pay attention to it.

3. Concentrating Attention

From quite early on in the program space the ABS practioner, the Anchor Person uses the phrase "Here and now". It emphasises the reality of phenomena (thoughts, emotions etc.) in immediate location and the time.

How and why does the "concentrating" of attention happen? What is the functionality of such a process?

Psychology teaches that we have a conscious, subconscious and an unconscious mind.

Eastern knowledge (Patanjali's Yogasutra – Ch-III) [3] posits that the awareness which brings to light our own selves and its experiences has the capability of transcending time and

space. Psychodynamics is in agreement as well, as it says that the unconscious has no concept of time. Translated into this conversation it suggests that our conscious mind is only a tip of the iceberg. It in fact stretches deep into our own lifetime and beyond. This attention stretches beyond the individual body into the consciousness of the other. It is connected as well to the collective consciousness (that includes the collective unconscious). In Sanskrit this is the Jivatma. Sri Aurobindo talks of the over mind and the superconscious mind. Tagore talks of the Jivatma as the real one that wrote all his stuff. [4]

Eckhart Tolle similarly points to the nature of consciousness as extending well beyond the mind. “The personality that has a past and a future momentarily recedes and is replaced by an intense conscious presence, very still but very alert at the same time. Whatever response is needed these arrive out of that state of consciousness” [5]

Ryan Howes writing in Psychology Today blog “Yalom on the Here and Now” [6] says Here and Now is based on the idea that the clients interpersonal issue will eventually emerge in the therapeutic relationship. A woman who feels betrayed by all her friends and family will probably feel betrayed by her therapist at some time..... (etc.). Therapy becomes less talking about issues and more working with these as they happen in the here and now.

ABS practice, eclectic as it is, draws perhaps most heavily from the world of group psychotherapy. Irvin D Yalom [7] speaks very highly of the value that focussing on the Here and Now brings. It immediately brings in authenticity and reality into the proceedings. In this essay I present the hypothesis that the Here & Now tool, momentarily for individuals and cumulatively for the whole group –during its lifetime – alters the members’ relationship with space and time as limitations of the scope of perception. It helps reconfigure the perceptual frames of all present (including the Anchor Personal/s). The frame is upgraded a little closer, to perceiving the experience a step closer to reality as is (inner and outer) from where it was.

This means a stepping further from perceptions rooted in “as it should be” (the source of all grief).

4. Distinguishing ABS from Therapy

ABS practice or Process Work do not offer therapy. The aim is to enhance good health.

Dealing with sorrows and conflicts is an inevitable stepping stone in the process. A second serious distinguishing feature is the relatively lower/less stiff entry barriers into the practice of ABS/Process work Labs in the Indian context. It is far easier to become a Process worker or ABS Practitioner than to become a certified therapist. Thirdly, our context here relates with work in groups as opposed to working with individuals in therapy, or, in a class on spirituality.

The concentrating of attention in the here and now opens at least a small doorway into this deeper/wider awareness that we all hold.

In the ordinary waking state, without concentrating the attention, the conscious mind’s eye is usually turned only outward. All our empirical senses are designed for this. The eyes, ears smell, taste and touch are directed outwards from the body. We are, without conscious awareness in contact with the other as well as the collective but have been trained all our lives to direct our attention outwards.

Our identities are created in order to give us the facility of being able to engage and relate with others. By definition therefore each identity is a configuration of openings through which we relate as well as a set of inhibitions that act as boundaries. It is a brilliant vehicle and a prison as well. In the net the identity is a limited space through which we deploy our energies. The limitations that the identity necessarily places end up becoming the sources of pathos. The identity thus is experienced as a burden from which the being seeks release in order to revel in the infiniteness of the self.

I am going into speculating why and how the Here and Now works in the subconscious as domain in ABS group practice while Eckhardt Tolle [8] and Irvin Yalom [9] strongly endorse and emphasize its value and efficacy. Tolle's work is as a Teacher and Yalom as a therapist.

As we relate with the world we receive glimpses of this infiniteness. Various names are attached to these – ecstasy, bliss, peace and so on. Sartre goes to great lengths in his Being and Nothingness exploring this.

In the lab using the “Here and Now” tool concentrates the attention and creates immediate access to the collective consciousness that the group is. As such it gives each person the sudden freedom to rise beyond his individual identity and look at it as a witness, as a “drashta”. This witness is not obliged during this escape to remaining loyal to old frames and past debts, hatreds etc. The drashta can reformulate the old emotion, thought or action pattern into a new one. The individual thus can easily “let go” and catch hold of a new choice he has made himself. He derives strength and energy from his membership and access to the collective consciousness including his own deeper memory, wisdom, discrimination and – faith in self and others.

The first encounter or, a taste of this infiniteness occurs with faith and love. Faith not as in religion, but faith in the fact that existence itself is an unknown, that we are necessarily in an ocean of “what we do not know” in the midst of which we strive endlessly and energetically to seek more knowledge. Faith as in accepting that another dawn will happen tomorrow.

I close with sharing an experience. The here and now is the only moment in which we exist. That is a self evident truth. What preceded this moment is only a memory. What will come next is only an anticipation. The only reality we experience is this here and this now. Rupert Spira (Science and Non Duality) asks “when does all experience occur?” obviously now and “where does all experience occur” obviously here. [10]

5. The Body in the Here and Now

Much of the practice of ABS/Process Work revolves around working with the mind – using action, thought and feeling data – self disclosed, as well as observed and experienced by others. This leads to significant learning – both by way of new action as well as new insights.

The human body is intelligent as well. Process Work can include tapping into the intelligence of the body. The body is a storehouse of enormous memory. These memories create an envelope that constrains our thought, action choices, perception and energy available for responsiveness and expression. It exercises silent but hugely powerful influence on our engagement with self and others.

The “Here and Now” tool is a very efficient way to bring attention to bear on the body and its intelligent content waiting to find expression. Such expression brings about dramatic improvement in the enactment of the identity, altering the “Here” dimension decisively. The entire mind body equation changes for the better. Unrecognised traumas create distortions in the identity which defy logic driven or emotion driven search methods. The here and now technique gives vent and expression to these deeply stored memories, paving the way for release and reconfiguration. This makes it possible in a way to change the past (as held in the mind so far). This is where I draw heavily from the essence of Yogic thought in which the body is the starting point of exploration as it demonstrates the psycho spiritual history of the person. As attention is brought to bear on the body it releases into the mind secret memories of childhood, even prenatal stages. Our Bindu Lab is an annual feature based on this. The body holds a greater amount of “unconscious” material than in the mind. Testimony for this has emerged in the works of Prof VanDer Kolk in the last few decades of his work with childhood sexual abuse and traumatised war veterans healing PTSD [11].

In conclusion

In other words it is my presence in the form of the body that creates the *here*, and it is the process I call *my mind* that creates the *now*. The here is a taste of the infinity of all space and now is a taste of eternity. It is this “tasting” that generates the energy needed to release oneself from the fixed orbit determined by the *past* into a new orbit chosen in the *present*.

The invocation and arousal of the “here and now” of Process Work practice is an invitation to this infinitude – a rising above the identity to the witness and back, that gives it its mystery, magic and resultant experience of freedom. It is a stepping away from the confines of time and space, albeit for a short duration.

Time and space are conceived in our minds essentially as limitations. That is a building block of our contemporary thinking and culture. This conception creates a web of cascading conceptions of “reality” reminiscent of the flat earth or anti-heliocentric conceptions.

Alternate conceptions appear as impossibilities. One of the potential strengths of Process Work is to foster and accelerate the shift/evolution of a conception of time and space that are likely to put man in synchrony with the universe rather than in competition with it.

Notes

- 1 *Banerjee, Sushanta* (1997) – What is Process Work. <http://samuday.com/resources/what-process-work>
- 2 *Banerjee, Sushanta* (2007) – Pebbles on the Beach.. A Practitioners Account of a 27 year Journey in OD. <http://samuday.com/resources/pebbles-beach> and *Banerjee, Sushanta* (2006) – Process Centered Institution Building, A Perspective and an Introduction to the Practice. <http://samuday.com/resources/pebbles-beach>
- 3 Any translation with commentaries of Patanjali's Yoga Sutra will show this in Chapter-III. My favourite version is the one by *Swami Satyanand Saraswati* – Bihar School of Yoga
- 4 *Atma Parichay* (Bengali) – a collection of six essays by *Rabindranath Tagore*, Reflecting on himself and his creativity. Published by Vishwa Bharati, Kolkata.
- 5 *Eckhart Tolle* – The Power of Now - P-42 – Yogi Impressions LLP, Mumbai 2001.
- 6 “Yalom on the Here and Now” – *Ryan Howes* – Psychology Today blog posted Sep. 16, 2010 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/in-therapy/201009/yalom-the-here-and-now>
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 *Eckhart Tolle* – The Power of Now - P-42 – Yogi Impressions LLP, Mumbai 2001.
- 9 “Yalom on the Here and Now” – *Ryan Howes* – Psychology Today blog posted Sep. 16, 2010 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/in-therapy/201009/yalom-the-here-and-now>
- 10 *Rupert Spira* a hugely popular teacher of Advaita philosophy through experiential methods of Atma Vichara - self reflection of the Tantric/Vedantic/Yogic traditions, This video I refer to is called “Meditation: The Now is I am”. - Youtube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=df9YPTe14nU>
- 11 *Van der Kolk. B*, The Body Keeps the Score: Brain Mind and Body in the treatment of Trauma, Viking Press 2014 and(2) Overcoming Trauma through Yoga: Reclaiming your Body