

THE LIFE OF SMALL GROUP MINISTRIES

By Thandeka

Small Group Ministries work. They grow congregations, increase pledges, re-energize congregants, and transform our sense of calling and ministry. Most of us doing Small Group Ministry have relied on Carl George's books to help us organize and make sense of this new model of ministry. This, however, has presented us with a special challenge: Carl George, who is the guru of Small Group Ministry for conservative Christians. George's theological explanation of the power of small groups is classically Trinitarian, as demonstrated in his chapter entitled "You Serve a Power God" in *Nine Keys to Effective Small Group Leadership*:

When Christians come together in the name of the Lord Jesus, there is a special sense of His presence--a sacrament of sorts in the sense of outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual graces. . . . Beautiful expressions of the Holy Spirit also take place as a person with one set of spiritual gifts interacts with those who have received other gifts.

Carl George names the three-in-one power source of small group work for most Christians: God, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus. This kind of classic Trinitarian God-talk makes little sense to most Unitarian Universalists because our liberal theological heritage was born, in part, from a severe critique of Trinitarian doctrinal claims that include a universal doctrine of original sin and a salvation restricted to an elected few. We are liberal religionists who affirm the inherent dignity, worth, and salvation of all.

As UU congregants and ministers, we are humanist, Buddhist, atheist, Christian, Jewish, pagan, eco-feminist, and more. This diversity of religious ideas and theological claims often makes it difficult to find a common ground, a place where we might all stand comfortably as Unitarian Universalists. This challenge is difficult, but not impossible if we step outside the language of classic, Christian theological discourse and undertake a social analysis of group power as a religious phenomenon. We can then affirm the foundation of our religious experience as the regenerating power of life itself. This affirmation unites us all as one religious people who have a diversity of theological perspectives on the human experience universal salvation. We thus begin with an explanation of the way in which we work together.

Accordingly, our theoretical task as Unitarian Universalists begins with the work of Emile Durkheim, the father of sociology, who undertook this task in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Durkheim believed that the collective energy of a group generates power in its individual members. According to Durkheim, the members of religious groups mistakenly attribute their new enhanced sense of personal power to a religious totem, icon, or artifact. Religious sentiment, Durkheim concluded, is thus the overflow of feelings generated in the individual by the group. Durkheim's doesn't explain the nature and source of the power generated by the group. Something happens to the individual in a group that engenders more energy within. But what is it? To answer

this question without recourse to theological discourse, we need sociology of a higher order. Such a study of human beings in groups entails a threefold analysis of power.

A threefold analysis of group power begins with the most basic kind of human power, affect. In short, *affective power*. Affective power is embodied power. It refers to an aspect of a theory discussed by psychoanalytic theorist Donald Nathanson in his book *Pride and Shame*. With Nathanson, I define human affect as the strictly biological portion of emotion. *Affective power* thus refers to the ways in which we, as biological organisms, become internally aware of the impact of the presence of others upon us.

Vivid examples of affective power are at the foundation of our own Universalist heritage, the life and work of Dr. George de Benneville, an eighteenth-century advocate of Universal salvation in America. When de Benneville was twelve years old, for example, he was sent to sea in a war vessel to learn navigation. When the ship docked at Algiers, he walked upon the deck to see the sights, and there saw “Moors,” who brought him refreshments. But when one of them fell and injured one of his legs, two of his companions kissed the wound, shed tears upon it, and then turned toward the sun and cried so loudly that de Benneville grew angry. And so they explained their behavior to him: They kissed the wound in order to sympathize with him, shed tears upon it because the salt in their tears would clean the wound, and turned to the sun to ask its creator to have compassion upon their poor brother and heal him.

De Benneville was so moved by their account that he felt his heart would break and he would die. His eyes filled with tears, and he condemned himself for his earlier reaction. He was compelled to cry out, “Are these men Heathens? No; I confess before God they are Christians, and I myself a Heathen! Behold the first conviction that the grace of our Sovereign Good employed: he was pleased to convince a white person by blacks, one who carried the name of a Christian, by a Pagan, and who was obliged to confess himself a Heathen.”

De Benneville was initially flooded with affect. His encounter with the Africans generated a series of electrochemical changes in his body that led him to anger, tears, the feeling of dying, and the need to cry out. These physical experiences brought about an altered state of consciousness, which de Benneville called a change of heart. His mind did not transform him; his body did. His tears, pounding heart, and torrential feelings constituted a revelation that challenged the racial, class, and religious creeds that were core to his self-concept. The feelings generated by his body soon subsided, however, and De Benneville continued the normal routines of his life, eventually returning to England. One evening, he went to a ball, where he became overheated and told his servant to bring a change of linen. As De Benneville dressed, he fainted, had a vision of himself as a firebrand burning in hell, and returned to consciousness crying, “I am damned.” Stricken with grief and fear, he was visited repeatedly by the court ministers, who tried to persuade him that he had not committed any great sins given his station and rank. But de Benneville was inconsolable, and the ministers finally gave up, concluding that he must not be one of the elect but rather one preordained for eternal damnation.

The sorrow of his soul, de Benneville tells us, was as heavy as death because he had seen that the root of all his sins and iniquities was within his heart. Now in extreme agony, he abandoned himself to the mercy of God, and at that moment he was transfixed. He saw “a most majestic appearance, whose beauty, brightness, and grandeur can never be described: [The Savior] looked upon me with grace and mercy and with a penetrating look of love; the fire of which so embraced my soul that I loved him in return.” De Benneville now felt that he had been saved by his “Savior, Mediator, and Reconciliator,” who had interceded for him with God. He felt that his sins had been forgiven, and he was filled with “pure grace.” From that point on, de Benneville preached universal salvation for all human beings, a severe heresy. Both Protestants and Catholics divided humanity into the damned and the saved using the orthodox, traditional Christian doctrine of sin and salvation. All human beings, from this orthodox perspective, are born bad and deserve eternal damnation and punishment in hell.

Branded a heretic, de Benneville fled first to France, then to Germany and Holland, where he preached universal salvation for twenty-one years. Persecuted and often imprisoned for his “heretical” statements, de Benneville, at age thirty-eight, migrated to America and ended up in Germantown, Pennsylvania, a German Pietist community. There he established himself as a physician and devoted the remaining fifty-four years of his life to preaching the doctrines of Universal Restoration.

It is important to note here that de Benneville did not found a church. Rather than create yet another schism among Christian churches, he wanted to unite the various Christian sects into small groups that Jacob John Sessler calls “little churches within the church,” all of which would be part of the “Invisible Church Universal.” Thus there could be Lutheran, Brethren, and Calvinist groups--all united by the experience of a change of heart. The link between them was thus not creedal. It was based on the power of the body to experience transformation through encounters with others. Creeds and beliefs were relegated to secondary importance.

What was the source of this power that transformed de Benneville? He attributed it to Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit. But if we look deeper into the story, we discover that the Trinity is first mentioned in the mental images and ideas de Benneville experienced after the physical effects of his revelation. He first saw a light, felt a change of heart, shed tears, and experienced other bodily feelings. Only after he had been flooded with feeling did he think about what these experiences meant in theological terms. Thus, at this second stage of his experience, he relied upon the theological language of Christian discourse, slightly changed because of the altered state of consciousness brought about by his feelings.

De Benneville’s theological reflections, in short, were secondary rather than a primary experience of his actual human engagement with others. As such, his Trinitarian discourse pertains to the power of human intellect. It is ideational power, the ability of a human being to translate what is felt into a doctrinal claim. Psychoanalytic theorist Donald Nathanson calls this shift from affect to ideas a movement from human biology to human biography. In short, we find here the ways in which human affect is interpreted

and explained as a religious claim determined by one's history of encounters with others within a social setting. Theology, as ideational power, is thus always a cultural phenomenon. It is talk about religious belief as a way of explaining powerful affective experiences.

Modern liberal religion is born of this distinction between affective and ideational power. Friedrich Schleiermacher, a nineteenth-century German Pietist, is called the father of modern liberal theology because his systematic analysis of the difference between feeling and thought, affect and ideas, demonstrated how theological discourse begins as ideational power that presupposes affective power. Schleiermacher taught us how to pay attention to human affections, instead of creeds or scripture, as foundational for theological reflection. In the Christian Faith he referred to affective power as affections, stimulations, and agitations. These movements of the body were the pious affections that presupposed theological ideas like the term God. In *On Religion*, Schleiermacher described the body astir with feelings brought on by human encounter as the first stage of religious experience. He called it the "natal hour of everything living in religion." Schleiermacher described this experience as

the first mysterious moment that occurs in every sensory perception. . . ,where sense and its objects have, as it were, flowed into one another and become one, before both turn back to their original position--I know how indescribable it is and how quickly it passes away. But I wish you were able to hold onto it and also to recognize it again in the higher and divine religious activity of the mind. . . . It is as fleeting and transparent as the first scent with which the dew gently caresses the waking flowers, as modest and delicate as a maiden's kiss, as holy and fruitful as a nuptial embrace; indeed, not like this, but it is itself all of these. A manifestation, an event, develops quickly and magically into an image of the universe.

Schleiermacher thus defined religion as this experience of encounter in which one is astir with affect that binds the self to another as a manifestation of life itself, "a moment of the infinite in the finite." As a place of encounter, this moment, for Schleiermacher, is something living. It is an act of creation, the emergence of a new relationship. At such times, we are conscious of our life and all of life as one. This concept of affective power as the first stage of religious experience makes liberal theological reflection a secondary event. Its adequacy as discourse is no longer dependent upon tradition, revelation, or the Bible. Rather, if human relationship is not the first reference for theological discourse, then the theological ideas fail their primary test. Schleiermacher gave us an Affect Theology. After Schleiermacher, liberal theological ideas referred to the human experience of relationships that transport us into the infinite expanse of life itself. The primary stage of liberal theological reflection became human affection.

Wilhelm Dilthey, Schleiermacher's biographer, applied Schleiermacher's theology of affective power and ideational power to the human sciences. The first science of the humanities thus became the science of human consciousness (affect + ideas). Dilthey's student, Martin Buber, developed the science of human consciousness into a

philosophical anthropology. Here we find the articulation of another kind of power that operates in small group work, *mutual power*.

Mutual power is the power of living relationship as rebirth. Relation is mutual, Buber tells us in *I and Thou*. Thus all real living is meeting. It is mutuality, “the cradle of Real Life.” Genuine wholeness, Buber argues, “can become visible only by the contemplation of all of [a human being’s] manifold nature.” Buber thus developed a philosophical anthropology, a sociology of human experience as it relates to “other living creatures, other bearers of consciousness.” We might say that Buber created a sociology of a higher order, one that focuses on “living relationship.” Buber developed the term *I-Thou* to describe this relationship as an intuition of mutual relating. As he said in his essay “The Nature of Man,” “What is peculiarly characteristic of the human world is above all that something takes place between one being and another the like of which can be found nowhere in nature.” This sphere, as Buber rightfully notes, is not a concept. Rather it is something living. So Buber describes rather than tries to define the place where this living relationship is found. It is found in “the sphere of ‘between,’” the “sphere that is common to [two human beings] but which reaches out beyond the special sphere of each.”

This “beyondness” that is present when two or more persons meet is the sacred ground of power and transformation that small group ministry reveals. What is it? It is life itself, the affective power of the human organism, the ideational power of the human mind to relate meaning back to the human experience of encounter, and mutual power, which is the cradle of human renewal. It is the place where you and I meet as We.

What then, in sum, is our own most direct answer to the question: Why do small group ministries transform Unitarian Universalists? Our answer: They regenerate the power of our bodies to feel the presence of others as the natal hour of everything living in religion. The source of this regenerating power is life itself, ever new.

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