

Carving Up Gracie: The Loss of Integration

William Bergquist, Ph.D.

It was a year ago (August 2019) when we convened our third annual Gathering of my students and faculty at The Professional School of Psychology (PSP). Eighteen doctoral students and five faculty members came to my home and town in Maine for one intensive week of study, dialogue, celebration and a “taste of Maine.” In previous years, we gathered together on the shores of the Northern California coast and on the beaches of Bali. Our focus, in part, during the Maine Gathering was neurobiology and the implications of emerging findings in this field for professional psychology practices.

Along with the serious academic exercises were the moments of collegiality enhanced by some lobster, theater, and shopping at L. L. Beans. During several evenings, I hosted our guests from around the world (mostly Asia and North America) at my home on the Maine coast. Greeting our visitors with great enthusiasm was the loving golden retriever that inhabit the home and heart of my wife and I. Our dog’s name is “Gracie.” Everyone fell in love with Gracie and she is photographed with the rest of us for the official Gathering picture. Gracie is a full-fledged member of the PSP community.

I provide all of this as background because a remarkable event occurred during one of our sessions on neurobiology. One of our doctoral students was making a presentation regarding the integrative processes occurring in biological systems: one can’t simply separate the different parts of a biological system and expect that when you put them back together there will be a living system. This student used Gracie as an example: “if you were to carve up Gracie and reassembled her there would only be a dead, dissected dog.” There was an immediate and quite emotional shock in the room: “you can’t carve up Gracie!” While this was initially brushed off as just a theatrical gesture that reinforces the important of integration, the “carving up Gracie” became a recurrent theme at the Gathering.

I have often reflected on this moment during the following months. It seems that a profound sense of loss may accompany any attempt to break a dynamic, living system down to its parts. My late colleague, David Halliburton, often talked about the “smashed frog” dilemma in the field of biology. While dissecting a frog in a high school biology laboratory might prove helpful in the teaching of anatomy, it is

still the case that the frog can never be reassembled into a living being. We still don't quite know what it means to bring life to dead matter – despite Mary Shelley's tales of Frankenstein.

The Individual and Group

I have been reminded of work I did many years ago with my colleague, Kate Regan. We ran several human relations laboratories together—but set them up in a quite different manner from the usual. Kate had a strong background in Tavistock Institute training—with its focus on the group itself as an entity to be studied. I came out of NTL Institute training—with its focus on the study of individual group members as they interact in the group. Kate and I decided that we would combine these two orientations and conduct groups in which the focus could shift from the group to the individual members of the group, and then back again to the group.

We discovered that rich learning was to be gained from both the NTL/Individual focus and the Tavistock/Group focus. Of even greater importance, however, was the rich (and unexpected) learning that came from the experiences of transitioning between the individual and group foci. There was a strong sense of lost individual identity when we moved from the individual to the group. Members of the group felt that their distinctive personal contributions to the group were now being devalued. With most of the groups being conducted in the United States, there was the broader reflection on the nature of individualism in our society.

There was an even stronger and much more emotional reaction to the shift from a group focus to one in which attention was devoted to individual group members. Much as in the case of carving up Gracie, there was a powerful sense of loss. The group had been a source of powerful binding—whether because of positive collective experiences or because of the often-painful working through of group-based issues (such as authority and such collective dynamics as acceptance, openness and trust). Once again, it seems that we find it hard as human beings to see something torn apart that is whole and living—even if the dissection is being done for the best of reasons.

Emergence

The emotions evoked by the prospects of carving up Gracie or moving a human relationship laboratory from a group to an individual focus might also be aligned, in a broader sense, to the phenomenon known as emergence. This is a process that reverses the shift from a whole to many parts. When emergence takes place, a new whole is created that could not have been anticipated from an

examination of its parts. The classic example of emergence is the combining of two part of hydrogen and on part oxygen—two gases that combined should produce a new gas. Instead, something quite unexcepted happens. These two gases combine to create water—which is certainly not just another type of gas.

We can come full circle by turning back to our focus during the Gathering on neurobiology. It seems that human consciousness is itself an emergent phenomenon. How does one account for the creation of an ephemeral event, such as being conscious of something, out of multiple physical events (the firing of many neurons). We try to account for this emergence by creating a dualistic framework (the Cartesian model of brain and mind or brain and spirit) or by denying somehow that there is something unique about consciousness (a monistic framework).

Conclusions

Gracie is something more than just body parts—and my wife and I love that integrative, loving companion that we adopted from the humane society many years ago. And water is something wonderful – whether lapping at the shore of our home in Maine or serving as the base for the miraculous transformation of buds on a green vine into something called champagne (which we drank in celebration at my home in Maine of the 40th year of PSP.) It seems that Integration is of some importance in our individual and collective lives. And I don't want Gracie to be carved up . . .