Resolving Resistances to Immediacy in the Group Setting

We posit that all resistances in group are also transference resistances (ego transference, id transference, and so on), but in this case they are motivated not merely by the members' projection onto the therapist, but by members' projection onto one another. In short, there are multiple transferences and multiple sources of resistance in group. Our masterplan is to work through these transference resistances.

Theoretically, we might say that we obtain maximum therapeutic leverage working through the transference—the relationships that, no matter how distorted, occur in the group room. Ahead of us, in practical terms, remains the task of identifying actual resistances, and dealing with them.

The ideal group runs along with alacrity and delight, and the best therapist, like the perfect host, gives the illusion of only being there, a guest at his own party. On the other hand, when a group is not running well, when members are silent, glum, complaining, detached,
even the most vigorous efforts by a therapist seem to be of no avail. One by one the members talk about leaving, often they just drift away. Why do some therapists appear to succeed effortlessly in keeping the groups motivated and eager for discovery, whereas others find the going depleting and a kind of drudgery? To those therapists who succeed, group therapy with all its challenges is ultimately a joy. The therapist, like the members themselves, has ever unfolding adventures to savor.

On the other hand, the severest critics of the whole process come from those therapists who slog yet benefit few or none of their members. These critics tend to blame their failure on the poor mix of their clients, or their pathology. To them, it seems that certain other group therapists are more fortunate in the referrals they get. Admittedly, there may be some good fortune involved when one begins a practice. But with proper techniques, nearly any therapist can, before long, develop groups whose members look forward to each meeting and are more curious than they ever were about themselves.

As we all know, many approaches properly qualify as group treatment. But regardless of the practitioner’s theoretical bent, one truth stands out. Those therapists who sustain a sense of immediacy and vitality in the room seldom want for success. They are the ones whose groups consistently bring in new material, form new ties in the group, and make the group experience a true adventure.

The art of group therapy lies very much in keeping groups alive and in the moment. It is this phrase “in the moment” that I would like to define by mentioning at least a few of its components.

In any group it is up to us to bring to the fore the dynamic forces inherent in the members. We do not generate these forces, as by exhortation, direction, or remonstration. Rather we release those forces. We believe the member who seems dull or logy or sleepy, like the person sitting at a lecture who dozes off, is not simply sleepy. Rather his or her seeming somnolence is the complex resultant force of energies within, forces working against one another.

The person may want to speak but dares not, suffering from a kind of overregulation—or repression, if you prefer. It is our task to unblock the energies that would permit members to express and discover themselves. Rather than allow these forces to stay in static equilibrium, we need to exteriorize them.

For instance, a member wanted urgently to say something, but was withheld by the fearful anticipation of being reprimanded dating back to his childhood. The result was silence on his part. Our aim was to release the forces within this member—that of desire and that of fear, so that the person had an experience with others and not simply a daydream or an unconscious conflict. When this person was freed to express both the desire and the fear, energy was released into the group. The intrapersonal experience became an interpersonal experience. Others were swept up by this wave of expression.

How do we exteriorize the inner lives of our group members? I want to consider the kinds of interventions that facilitate a group’s flow so that the inevitable resistances of the individual members do not bog down the progress of the group. Let us consider three of the most common resistances we may encounter and certain useful interventions applicable to each.

**LIVING IN THE PAST**

Perhaps the primary resistance to living in the present is the tendency of the group members to talk in the past tense instead of in the present.

A member’s talking about his or her past in response to events occurring in the group room may at best deepen our emotional understanding of the person and may be very helpful to that person.

For instance, when it was discovered that a man was afraid to express anger in the group, he immediately recalled an incident in which his parents condemned him for being angry. There was a sense that the whole group developed a new appreciation of his dilemma. Members changed their attitude toward him and the tension in the room dissipated.

Contrast this memory of the past, which fleshed out the present, with a member’s perennial complaints about his parents, complaints that elicit no fresh insights and kept sporadically generating irritation in fellow members. In the latter case, the person was talking about his past as a resistance to meaningfully interacting with the group. The sense here was that the group was going nowhere; it was marching in place in midair.
When one or more members talk about the past as a resistance, it may be necessary to unblock those members so that they discuss what is going on, especially what they are feeling right now in the group room. Failure to do this results in stagnation and a pervasive sense of fatigue or boredom in the members and in ourselves. As we all know, many of our members relish talking about their history. Among such members are those who are dedicated to complaining about their childhood. In addition, certain patients, misinformed by what they have seen in the movies and on television or by what they have read, imagine we require them to go into every detail of their early lives. They suppose that if they do so, we in turn will say something, afford them a special insight that will release them from their psychological bondage. Such people do not realize that they are reenacting their histories by their very performance right now, and that indeed we have much richer and more serviceable evidence about them than anything they can recall. Others talk about their past in order to stay away from their present emotional experience. Telling us how they were mistreated as children becomes a substitute for identifying what they are experiencing and doing in the moment.

For instance, a member who feels neglected in the group room tells us lengthily about how his parents ignored him. This person never even alludes to his or her feeling of being neglected right now. Others in the room may sympathize with his tale as long as they themselves are not seen as the ones inflicting the neglect. Such a victim of past injury may find a few sympathizers who never tire of showing what good souls they are, bottomless in their compassion for the underdog. Perhaps they too feel neglected right now and are indirectly crying for themselves.

The stories that victims-of-history relate do not introduce significant affect-laden material. They do not spark similar incidents in fellow members. They do not advance the group emotionally. These people are merely saying in group what they have said to friends over and over again. They may merely use the tales to get some illegitimate gratification. No real headway can be made until the subject matter shifts to the present. The members' feelings toward their fellow members and not insights into the past are the real grist for progress.

How are we to reframe these members onto their present experiences? Even to discuss what took place yesterday in someone's life is still a preoccupation with the past. True, such subject matter is almost contemporary, but the immediate past is nonetheless the past, and our best leverage is always to use the present.

One approach in making the translation from past to present is to bluntly use ourselves as the frame of reference. For instance, when members of a group are collectively lamenting childhood mistreatment, a therapist asks point blank: “How am I mistreating you people right now?”

If you try this, be prepared to become the temporary object of sharp accusations as the cannons shift their aim from the past to the present. You may find yourself challenged by attitudes toward you that your group members have been harboring for quite some time. But even if you are rocked by the fusillade, listen without defending yourself. (Take solace in the fact that you may have released the feeling frozen in the preoccupation with the past, resolving the group's stagnation.) After all, the group members have been talking about you in a long-distance way for some time—disguised in an assault on absent parents. The change is merely one toward directness.

A second possible intervention, when members complain about having received some particular treatment in the past, is to ask whether they feel they are being treated the same way right now. This time, instead of putting yourself in the center, ask the members who in the room is treating them as those in the past did? Who is engaging in the dastardly deed?

For instance, several members talk about having left their marriages or homes because they did not feel loved or understood. This time we ask, “Who in this group makes you want to leave, doesn't understand you?” Interestingly, the very member or set of members who most lament some treatment in their past, have for a while sensed that they have been subjected to exactly the same lack of understanding in the group. Indeed, their subconscious recognition of being so treated is what activated their memories of the past. These people have found it safer to talk in past terms.

In some cases, the members are unconsciously pleading for those in the room to give them what they had gone without, to abrogate their past injuries. They are urging the other members to salve some wound
they have been carrying with them for almost a lifetime. However, the real problem is that “character is fate”—to quote the ancient Greek adage—which means that most people who have been repeatedly mistreated throughout life, have, under the influence of repetition compulsion, been prompting that treatment.

For instance, one woman repeatedly fails to acknowledge what other people say to her; this prompts a response in kind. When she talks, and especially when she says things that are important to her, the members whom she has snubbed take unconscious revenge. They change the subject; they treat her as if she is invisible. Even when they do respond to her clamors to be heard, they do so in an arid way, as by interpreting what she says or by making general statements about people like her.

Observe the sequence that we as group therapists must follow in such a case. We find the group member lamenting past mistreatment; we ask ourselves whether there is present mistreatment. Once we diagnose the present circumstance—in this case the woman’s being neglected by other group members—we may ask ourselves how this person is evoking repetition of the past? That is, we try to understand exactly how the group members are embodying past figures who treated the individual as the individual has described being treated long ago.

Having brought the ancient complaint into the present—that is, having construed it as an ongoing experience for the complainant and seeing the hand that others play, we are ready to intervene actively.

We proceed stepwise, “But you people in this room are neglecting her so far as I can see,” we might say. When at least some group members see and acknowledge that they are doing this, we are in a position to study why they do so. “Right now, why are you people neglecting her?” Perhaps someone will break the ice by admitting that he or she feels “put off” by the woman. “Put off?... How come?... When?”

We invite the group to do the work by offering their own best explanations. In doing this, we make sure to have them tell the woman exactly how she has neglected them—and, if possible, how she did so in this very session. “So,” we sum up after they have given their renditions, “Just because she has neglected you people, you feel the necessity to treat her that same way?” We have assigned the group the burden of identifying how they are treating her and the reason for it, which includes the discovery and putting into words how she invites the very situation that she has been bemoaning.

Of course, every case is different and the group dynamics will determine where we go next. But the important thing to note is that we have brought an inert memory into the present. The members, including the woman who began this episode with her lament, are now talking about an immediate interaction, shot full of feeling. The group is alive and productive. Members are talking about present-tense, moment-to-moment events, which include their role and hers.

Many people talk in past terms because in that way their reports cannot be challenged or reinterpreted. They are asking us in the present to take their side, to give them sympathy, and perhaps to arm them with words, which they did not have when the original injustices, real or imagined, were perpetrated on them.

For instance, in one group, Joe tells us that everybody favored his brother when they were young. This older brother was an Adonis who used cheap tricks to win people over. Those tricks succeeded, Joe tells us, and as a result he, poor Joe, went virtually unseen. It may well be that Joe is remembering this experience. Or it may be that he is exaggerating his brother’s machinations in his memory, because he feels that the same thing is going on right now.

We ask members in the group who, in their opinion, is using cheap tricks to steal attention away from Joe. Perhaps, to no one’s surprise, the members cite one among them, Frank, who has been hogging attention from all of them. Joe’s “memory” was a clarion call to the group’s understanding of how they felt and what Frank was doing.

Or perhaps no miscreant comes to anyone’s mind? We then ask the other members why Joe does not let a past experience repose in the past and stop talking about it. We may follow this with, “What can we as a group do to make Joe the center so that he can disburden himself of his past?” Perhaps a member will tell us, in no uncertain terms, “Damn it, Joe is the center! We are always talking about how his brother one-upped him 25 years ago. He dominates the room with that ploy!”

By cursing those in his past, Joe may very well have been expressing aggression toward someone right in the room—possibly Frank.
Joe’s talking in the language of the past was a device to mask himself and his very feelings of aggression. Possibly, some members in the group, likewise fearing confrontations in the present, welcomed the language of the past. All of this may have been unconscious. No matter, our role is to convert such muted language into language of the living.

One example can epitomize the working through of the blocking caused by a preoccupation with the past. A man with many years of individual therapy entered a sophisticated group and proceeded to act as if a group session were no different from an individual one. He was a highly successful, querulous, and unyielding man of industry. He knew his own mind and it was definitely, in his estimation, superior to any other mind in the group. His first criticism was that there was not enough personal history in the group. He added that the group had to hear the story of his life or the members would not know where he “came from” nor what he was “all about.” At first glance, it sounded like a reasonable request and he was a spokesman for the argument that there is no real need for a group to stay immediate.

At first, the members went along with his demand. But their tolerance wore thin as he kept grabbing time from others to talk at length about his colorful childhood. What was particularly suspect about his insistence was that he would start the session with a long memory that had little to do with the ongoing theme of the group. Members would listen a few minutes and then switch over to the unfinished interactions of the previous session or some emotional concern of the moment.

The offended man would try to get the attention back, insisting, with loud rapid-fire arguments, that unless he be given space to finish his story no one would get the point of it. When members did not respond with respectful compliance, he aggressively interrupted their interchanges. The tactic caused quite a ruckus. Frustrated, he made threatening noises about dropping out.

One member told him that he really did not have to talk about his history because he was certainly living it now. Indeed, any one of them could put together his childhood from how he was behaving with us. The man was incredulous. He called this sheer blarney. Challenged, the member said that what he guessed from the man’s behavior was that the man probably spent his life grabbing attention and leaving when he did not get it. A woman added that he constantly contended that he had insufficient time to tell his story and indicated that he was probably uncomfortable as an infant, perhaps colicky, and cried a lot, but his mother could give him little attention. Another member agreed that there was not enough personal history in the group. He added that the group had to hear the story of his life or the members would not know where he “came from” nor what he was “all about.” At first glance, it sounded like a reasonable request and he was a spokesman for the argument that there is no real need for a group to stay immediate.

When the man was startled, it was too long ago for him to recall, but his siblings—10 and 12 years older—had told him that this had happened. He was so keen to report that he had not. I agreed that the memories he was so keen to report might not happen, but the ones we could reconstruct, the man wanted to know about the memories he could recall. He insisted that for our purposes those memories might not be of crucial significance. He waved me aside. What did I know about his relationship with his father? A sensitive woman asked if he recalled being slapped as a child. This astonishment deceived the man. How on earth could she know that? The woman described how often he had been slapped, sometimes covered, and closed his eyes when someone sharply disagreed with him. The woman added that she could virtually hear the sound of a slap when he went into that posture. She even suggested he had frequent fights with his many brothers. Look at the dozen squabbles he had in less than 3 months.

And what about his mother? He is always trying to get attention from the women by flexing some kind of assertive muscle.

The reconstructions visibly shook him. If we did not want memories, what did we want? Members were clear on this point. They wanted him to tell what he felt toward them and stop flooding them with vital statistics and startling facts. No memories at all? Not quite, I assured him. If a memory is full of feeling and is in the direct current of what is going on, the whole group would guarantee him its full ear. Hasn’t he been doing anything up to now? Oh, yes, members agreed. Up to now, he had been parading out memories—a leftover from his years of individual treatment—to get the attention he felt deprived of as a child. This contented him.

The incident resolved his resistance to immediacy. It also proved to be a remarkable demonstration that much of one’s past, if unresolved, manifests itself in the present. All it needed was to be translated and understood.
LIVING IN THE FUTURE

A second major resistance to living in the present, one that we will commonly encounter, is the members’ disposition to try to live in the future.

There is real value in dreaming about the future—visions give a person a sense of direction and hope. However, there are people who talk incessantly about the future, who rush into it, in order to abstract themselves from unpleasant experiences in the present. For such people, discussion of the future is a denial of present difficulties—in particular of present relationships. Where we suspect that a person’s talking about the future is a resistance, we need to convert such talk into an emotionally alive discussion of what is taking place in the group right now.

Once again, we are faced with the task of bringing members into the immediate, but this time we are inviting them to return to us rather than ushering them forward. For instance, there are group members who constantly shun the immediate because the tugs and tides of real-life experience loom as intolerable. Some obsessively anticipate the future as if it is sure to be dire. “If I reveal my affectionate feelings for you,” a woman said to a man sitting next to her in one of my groups, “you will probably get anxious and disappear for the next 3 weeks.”

This group was surprised because the man was not prone to do this. However, others in the woman’s life, first her father and now her husband, would invariably draw back when she expressed warmth. This woman herself had been for some time battling a similar tendency of her own to withdraw from demonstrative people.

Anticipatory dread is one common motivation for our members’ living in the future. We may often infer it in those who talk tentatively and in foreboding terms. Their sentences start with the subjunctive.

“If I were to... Should you just... Were you to...” They almost invariably signal that thoughts trembling with apprehension are lurking in the wings.

We see the same kind of futuristic talk wrapped around other feelings simmering just beneath the surface. “I would like to have a feelings simmering just beneath the surface.” “I would like you...” “I really like you...” “My relationship with you...” becomes a substitute for “I love you.” The member suggests a state of emotion without or “I love you.” The member suggests a state of emotion without... being accountable for it. Other members are more direct in using the future as a hedge. “From now on I’m really going to listen to you,”... from now on I’m really going to listen to you,”... future as a hedge. “From now on I’m really going to listen to you,”... future as a hedge. “From now on I’m really going to listen to you,”... future as a hedge.

We must understand that such talk is a dessertive act. “I have to... I have to... I have to...” fall in the same category of seeming to be present while projecting into the future. These conditional statements, each suggesting that some condition will occur but not yet delivered in the offing, each in a sense a forward projection, are once removed from the immediate. It is as if the people who speak this way are seeing others and seeing themselves from a safe, solitary distance. Sometimes these people are distinctly conscious that they are not giving the things they are talking about. They are painting a better tomorrow as a deliberate substitute for expressing themselves today.

Many futuristic expressions have a formality that makes them bloodless. Hamlet’s line about “the pale cast of thought” applies well to them. They are stillborn and unemotional promises. Consequently, the person who talks in future terms will not have the meaningful emotional experience in the group that expedites real progress.

As for the group itself, to the extent that its members talk in terms of an unwritten tomorrow, it will slow to a crawl. No new ties can be established by this once removed talk. Sooner or later the members come to sense an unreality about their group experience. They are taking no real risks, and risk is always necessary for a group to cohere and move forward.

Above all, as group therapists, we must be sensitive to the difference between direct communication and futuristic talk. Our aim is to
make members become aware of that difference. Ideally, members will learn to spot the futuristic, to distinguish the promissory from the real. We may proceed by asking an identifying question. For instance, Edna says to Mary, "If you would only speak gently to me, I am sure we could develop a real intimacy." We listen, and perhaps we believe that this is so, but that is not the point. The members are there, above all, to communicate their real and present feelings, not to set the scene for tomorrow. Edna has just laid down a stipulation, "If you would. . . ." She is not telling us what she is experiencing when spoken to harshly. She is telling us rather what she will feel if spoken to differently. We might ask other members. "Why isn't Edna telling Mary what she is experiencing, instead of making a request?"

Some will take the position of the person Edna is addressing, missing our point. Others, especially anyone who has felt maneuvered or manipulated by Edna in the past, will get our point at once. Such a person might answer, "The reason Edna isn't telling us what she is feeling is that she doesn't like her feeling. She's trying to arrange a brand new experience so that she won't get hurt." No matter. Our question, which distinguishes the futuristic from the present, has alerted members to the difference, and, at best, has been an unmistakable cue to the group to return to the present.

Certain individuals become ideal for us to use in baring evasive talk about what "might be." Such people are perfect to turn to because of their acuity to the problem. Perhaps we have already made someone else in the room aware of his or her bent in this direction. Regardless of how long it took for that person to arrive at this perception, now that he or she has, the person may be superalert to this tendency in others. In the following case, such a member helped the whole group as well as himself.

Mark, a suave newcomer, attracted everyone with his good looks, his dashing clothes, his unflappable equipoise. To women, he seemed a dream come true. Everything in his manner suggested the blossoming of romance. But when a woman would respond to his beguiling manner with warmth or admiration, Mark would put her on the defensive. One way he did this was to point to one of her blemishes. He made his critique ever so gently with a hesitant, often apologetic tone in his voice—conveying the impression that the furthest thing from his mind was to inflict any pain.

"I perhaps contribute to this, Maggie," he would begin with a disarming smile, "but I'm trying to be as honest as I can in this setting, you know. And I've noticed something which I would like to say without offending you. If you weren't so coy, I mean kind of flirty, I could take what you said more seriously. Something might even get going between us. As it is, well, I don't know. . . ." It was always a perfect squealcher, sensitive with a slight tinge of sadism, offered as if in the best interests of the woman. What he said was invariably perceptive, something that might even have been helpful were it not in the service of some wished-for hope. It skipped over the present, teasingly offering a brighter future. It was not long before the women seemed to catch their breath, bracing for some correction whenever they had to address Mark. He was no different with the men, with whom he was more aloof and less apt to hold out a promise.

Within a month he had exerted a numbing effect on the group. I could see this happening. Ordinarily, the mere mention that a member was futurizing would bring him or her into the present. But Mark treated such interventions with polite indifference.

Carlos, a compliant member, had spent his childhood trying to be good and get ahead and not liking himself for it. He had recently begun to appreciate this and had become allergic to correction from anybody. In one session, just after Mark had offered one of his stipulations to a woman, I asked Carlos what the look of disgust on his face might be saying. Carlos identified what Mark was doing.

"It's Mark. His sweet patter. The 'If only you would' and 'if you just were' stuff that he dumps on us. It's for the birds! Mark, in case you don't know it, everybody has got something a little less than perfect. Nobody is stopping you from getting close to anybody.' Nobody could tell just how Mark was taking it; but it looked like he was brushing it off in his usual fashion. The woman he had found wanting blew up.

"That's right, Mark. You are great at sitting in judgment and finding others lacking something. You want me to change. You want everyone to change. Everyone except you!"

There was a sudden surge of energy in the room. Members who had been smarting from the bruises dealt by Mark jumped in to add their impressions of his intentions. This rapidly led to conjecturing about the feelings behind his remarks. Members wanted to know how
he felt when he was evaluating them, Mark did not seem to know. I invited others to speculate what his feelings might be. Their guesses were fairly accurate. Beneath Mark’s facade simmered his anger, and underlyng that was an abiding fear that it was he who would be found wanting if he got too close to people. Mark was mute. His facade seemed to crumble; he had nothing to say. I had to step in several times to protect him before the session was over.

Although not trying to squash him, members took on a new attitude toward Mark. When he responded with some conditional statement about a member, another might break in with, “We know, Mark. But what do you feel when you say that?” Members kept pinning him down to get to his emotions in the present. The massed pressure of the group had a profound effect on him. The Mark that revealed himself in the moment was quite different from the Mark who used the imperfections of others to avoid his present experience. Once he recognized the aggression behind his pseudohelpfulness, his frozen fears thawed. They were plentiful and terrifying. He was dominated by a pathetic sense of worthlessness. He revealed that he had manufactured a personality—based on movie heroes, men about town, and fantasy. With some reassurance Mark realized that there was nothing wrong with his fears and apprehensions as long as he talked about them. As long as he kept writing future scripts for others, he would keep everyone at a distance and go on living a lonely life as the most eligible unavailable bachelor in town. Mark became amenable to any correction of his flight into the future and began to live in the moment. The group resumed its buoyancy, released from a questioning self-doubt they had not even identified until Carlos’ explosive observation. Carlos had done Mark and the group a great service, but Mark had involuntarily done the group a service too. He had demonstrated the futility of futuristic thinking to them. They could now refocus themselves on their present lives. Strange as it may seem, the person who benefited most was Carlos. He saw that his independent perception of events had an enormous impact on others. It emboldened him to be more forthright in his dealings with every inhibiting agent in his life.

LIVING OUTSIDE THE GROUP

A third major resistance that group members erect against living in the present is to constantly discuss their outside lives rather than their relationships with one another.

Here again, we must decide if the content fleshes out the person’s experience in the group, if it amplifies understanding, or if it is a mere resistance. At times, a member’s reference to outside events can help the person connect with other members. For instance, the group members have just caught on to the fact that a man in the group has been constantly dismaying them by acting as if misunderstood. He has been making them feel inadequate and guilty. Once they point this out, the man volunteers, “That hits a mark. My wife says I always act disappointed.” He details a meaningful incident, one that led his wife to say this. Members go over the parallels between his experience with his wife and his experience with them. He sees the similarity. For the first time, the members feel that they truly connect with him and he feels understood by them.

But such positive instances of the use of outside events are outweighed by the number of those in which people who discuss their outside lives are doing so as a defense against the immediate. The member who discusses his or her real world at length is resisting expression of the feeling that he or she has in some ongoing group relationship. Such outside events isolate the member and drain the group of its energy.

It is for good reason we ask members to talk about their thoughts and feelings toward one another and why they have them (chapter 4). We believe that the members will manifest their whole universe of responses and tendencies in the way they connect or do not connect right in front of us. We obtain maximum therapeutic advantage through these relationships, no matter how distorted, specifically because they occur in the group room.

For us to work with what members report occurring outside of the room leaves us with a variety of disadvantages. The reported ways of connecting with outside personalities are biased in several ways: the tales tend to be slanted by the reporter, distorted by the reporter’s feelings, many critical elements are left out, and so forth. Moreover,
a group that tries to move ahead on hearsay will surely border on advice giving and quickly wear out its usefulness. There is always much turnover in groups whose energies are absorbed in the real-life dilemmas of its members. The best its members can do is to sympathize with the reporter, offer counsel, or engage in intellectual speculation; and as often as not, the members will not quite know what to sympathize with or understand.

Were the group present as the incidents unfolded, instead of merely hearing the member's account of them, they might have seen these incidents quite differently from the way they got reported. And their impressions, aside from being various, will tend to be congruently shared and nearly always prove far more useful to the person if the group were actually present.

By inviting the members to concentrate on their experiences with one another, we lose no data, as they will inadvertently reenact their outside patterns in the room. And what we gain is the emotional immediacy that we would have reaped if we were actually present at the events being reported. In the following case, without my intervening, the benefit of immediacy became evident.

A writer in one of my groups, Sherman, talked about his growing problems with his fiancee, a woman he once reported great feelings for and with whom he now tended to be dissatisfied. Nevertheless, he was hoping his discomfort would clear up once they were married. Yet his accounts of their disagreements left us with no choice but to conclude that the woman was petty, spiteful, and extremely self-centered.

The incident that provoked the final break-up began with Sherman's offering her money to go out on a rainy night to buy pies for a dinner they were giving for friends. She countered that the main dish she was preparing would be burnt. Sherman protested that he was deep into finishing a newspaper assignment due the following day. He was contributing more than his share by paying for the dinner. She burst out with, "Must you always think of only what you are doing?" Push came to shove and the woman stormed out of his apartment and his life.

He was distraught about it. I echoed some other failed relationships with women. For 3 weeks several members kept reassuring him that he struck them as a sensitive, charming, and compassionate fellow with whom it was easy to get along. Others emphasized that he was better off without the woman; he should be glad he did not marry her. A few pointed out that he would have more time for his projected novel and be able to throw some energy into the group. He could not be consoled. He attacked himself for his penchant for picking women who lacked real empathy.

Toward the end of the fourth session, a woman reported a dream in which Sherman and she were on a crowded bus and she was trying in vain to get his attention. In the dream, Sherman kept reading a newspaper and did not hear her. The group turned to Sherman to get his reaction to this dream about him. They were astonished to hear him say, "What the big deal? You had a bad night, that's all." Nobody could believe that he had actually spoken with such sovereign finality. The woman asked, "Is that all you can say about my dream?" Sherman shot back, "Look, I've got something real we've got to finish here. Time is running out. We can't spend the last few minutes speculating about a dream." The woman responded that she would never again reveal any other feelings toward Sherman.

Instead of considering Sherman's pressing concern whether to call this former girl friend or not, the members recalled the charge that the girl friend had leveled that he thought only of himself. Sherman threw a temper tantrum. He had to reach a decision. It was a side of his personality not evidenced before. At one point, he threatened to storm out of the room if the group would not talk about what he thought was of greater importance. The group found itself contending with a Sherman they had never dealt with before.

Had Sherman not enacted his pattern in front of all the members, the group might have gone on talking about outside events, buying into his self-serving explanations. Even those few members who suspected that there was more to Sherman's mishaps than he led them to believe could not be sure of their surmises. It was now clear that he was only seemingly cooperative with them. Because he was not directly involved with the members, he treated them in a socially acceptable, even disarming, way—at least until this incident.

Sherman's revealing the ferocity of his heretofore hidden, cavalier attitude proved invaluable. Instead of sympathizing with his plight, they now took a skeptical view of his tales of being put upon by girl
friends and focused solely on how he treated them. They could confront him with subtle observations that they would never have focused on if they had only received his account of the events in his life. Much later, the mystery of the discrepancy in his behavior between the group and intimates cleared up. Sherman had been strictly trained to behave like a cultivated social being in public, no matter how he was indulged in his own family. With intimates he was at home and with the group he was in public.

It takes the personal event—an immediate experience in the present—for an individual or a group to grasp a full appreciation of its meaning. Patterns of behavior reported, no matter how vividly, never rival patterns that are played out in the group. Shakespeare’s Shylock, on discovering that he was betrayed by his daughter and robbed of his jewels, blurted out, “The curse never fell on our nation till now”—which he immediately corrects, quite properly to “I never felt it till now.” The point is well made that there is no substitute for the experience in vivo.

How do we actively bring reported experiences into the group so that they unfold in front of us? As suggested earlier, one way is to ask the person who reports an event in his or her life whether such a thing is happening in the group room. Let us go into this approach in a little more detail.

A woman complains that men want to seduce her but do not take her seriously. We might ask if any man in the room is treating her that way. If the person of whom we ask this question replies no, people outside the group do this but no one does it here, we can proceed in what seems like a theoretical way, but really is not at all.

“If someone in this room were to treat you the same way, who would it be? How would that person do it?” It may seem surprising, but people who cannot formulate what is going on when asked directly are often able to imagine what might happen. “Well, the person who comes closest to being seductive and heartless in this room is John.” We turn to him. “How do you feel about her?” John might profess such feelings, or perhaps he shocks all of us by accusing the woman of trying to seduce him. Such reversals are commonplace. Either way, we have infused life into a complaint. Her cry is present tense, substantive, and the group can respond to it with some understanding.

A second approach to this woman’s report that men flirt with her would be to turn to the whole group. We might ask of no one in particular, “Has anyone ever seen evidence of men trying to seduce her here?” The group members might single out someone. If not, he might tell us his reaction to the someone in the room, perhaps a man, will tell us his reaction to the someone in the room itself. When the member merely gave us hearsay reports, we were all essentially in the dark, making the kind of intellectual stabs at insights that literary interpreters are forced to make from shards of information about artists long deceased. More important, our intervention energizes the group and the members can move forward. They are not reporting history, they are making it. The critical move is to identify those communicating indirectly and their potential for impeding so that we can apply our methods.

**SUMMARY**

Any group succeeds or fails to the degree that the members meaningfully interact. It is through this coming together that they reveal their most crippling patterns and outgrow them. With this in mind, group therapists should give highest priority to emotionally laden interactions. We do this not by exhortation to arouse the members, but by unlocking the forces already residing in them. Whenever possible, we translate the intrapsychic into interpersonal terms. In short, we exteriorize the inner lives of our group members so that they can help one another engage in feelingful interchanges in the moment.