ONLY CONNECT

ED BERNAN

A deeply personal view of our fragmented society by a man who, in very practical ways, is challenging people’s indifference and apathy both towards each other and the community to which they belong.

INTERVIEWER:
Could you tell me something about Inter-Action group sessions? How do you see the role of these experiments?

ED BERNAN:
Well, the Inter-Action group session was developed on a few very practical lines, using folk tradition games and building into these games an analysis which could make these games technical. That is to say, if you take a game and just use it in its cultural context, it can probably only do one thing, or maybe two things. It can cause excitement and fun, and avoidance behaviour, because most games are based on an element of competition, of avoidance, or of achievement of a particular goal. What we have done is to make a fairly sophisticated analysis of game, based on the folk tradition of games because that is something we have all shared. We are then able to use this as a technical method which can be applied in situations like entertainment, remand homes, youth clubs, adult groups, mental hospitals, geriatric wards of hospitals. I must emphasise that we make no claims for this as therapy, a science, or even a system.

INTERVIEWER:
And how do you get people to react, people who might never have reacted? For instance, I know that people who go to prison quite often suddenly express themselves in poetry and art and drama who might never have become at all articulate. How do you get through to people? How do you get through the layers of apathy?

ED BERNAN:
There are many different aspects to what seems to be the process. But first of all you motivate by the fact that it’s a game and it’s fun, and the attention-span required is short. There is no ostensible intensity and there is no ‘content’ supplied which is of significance outside of the participants’ interest or understanding, because the content is supplied by the game players, you see. This is a basic element of a technical method. Then, the very playing of the game removes or lowers inhibition, so one has got a two-way thing going. You can motivate by making it fun and by having people supply the content themselves, which makes it all the more relevant to them, and you can elaborate the process. It starts a snowball, because through participating one starts to lower inhibition, and that reinforces itself along the way. That is why this method we are developing can be applied in so many different situations.

INTERVIEWER:
Can you expand a bit about the method?

ED BERNAN:
Well, yes. It is an open-ended method. As I have said before, it is not a system. We make no claims for it whatsoever. Other people make claims for it and they invite us into different institutions. When we are in mental hospitals, and there is a therapist present, then it appears to be therapy. We are not so insular or self-centred as to think that we have discovered anything; rather, it is a very workmanlike, technical application of something which deserves to be looked at in great detail by
our research unit (which is reinforced by a number of well-known educationalists and people in the field of psychiatry).

We hope that (if we can raise the funds) this Applied Arts Research and Development Unit will be looking at this, its implications and results, over a five year period. So we take it on the one hand fairly seriously, although we realise it is not a great answer to the world’s problems. But it does have certain implications: freedom, within frameworks—allowing people to express themselves in a situation where they feel there will be no retaliation or where they feel they aren’t being gotten at, where they feel they have a right to be free, and they have a responsibility to use that freedom in relation to the other people there. It is a very objective and simple way of getting people to feel a human connection, a relationship with somebody else very quickly. It is also a method for stimulating creativity in a group context.

INTERVIEWER:
What are your views on the rather publicised Truth Games one hears about in rich American retreats?

ED BERMAN:
Well, is truth the money they are paying for the game? Any game can be a truth game. Once you have made an analysis of games, you can see that any game, literally any game, can be made into a truth game by putting what we call a ‘key signature’ onto it. But the problem is that most people limit themselves to a category, so a truth game seems different from a game of tag. For example, Tag, or Tiggy, whichever you call it, can be a truth game; and it is that kind of idea, that kind of dynamic flexibility (the idea of applying one form in different contexts) that we are interested in. Seeing how personality can change and how ideas need not be fixed and how things can grow and develop—this is very, very important to us.

INTERVIEWER:
Can you talk to me particularly about the sessions you have had at the Henderson hospital?

ED BERMAN:
The Henderson Hospital is a therapeutic community. After doing a demonstration at a conference on therapeutic communities, I was invited to work there. We have our own manner of going about it administratively. We put ourselves on our own mettle, as it were, and so we don’t have a contract there. We go back only if invited each week—we leave a night open every week, and if they ring us, then we go back, so it is totally based on its own acceptance and not on any authority or conscience requirement like ‘oh, somebody is coming—we must go’. I must say that there has never been a week when we haven’t been invited when we had planned to go. We get up to half of the patients in the unit coming to sessions.

INTERVIEWER:
How long would you spend at a session?

ED BERMAN:
Well, a session at the Henderson usually lasts about two hours, and one reason for its success and utility is that we are outsiders there. Part of our approach is to reinforce and complement other people’s programmes of activities by adding sessions to it, because as outsiders we can contribute something. There are certain disadvantages to being outsiders, naturally, but there are also certain advantages. The ties, the spider webs of emotional relationships, have not formed to the same degree, and one is more free and accepted on certain levels to do certain things. That is how we can be used in that sort of context (in addition to the method itself).

Besides individual sessions, we do have a training course which takes forty hours. Unfortunately, we do not have our own building. It is rather ironic that we have eight different companies (including three theatre groups and a film company), and no building or permanence of our own; and indeed the Inter-Action co-operative is losing the houses we are living in now, in the next three months. Because of this situation, an anomalous physical situation of being a full-fledged educational operation without a building, we run courses through different authorities or groups. Thus, if a community organisation in South London wants to set up a
course and make it open to the public, and they can arrange to get some money from somewhere, we would go and do it there. We have run a couple of courses at the University of London's Institute of Education, and are going to run more; we are going to run a course at Bristol University's Institute of Education.

INTERVIEWER:
And then if somebody has been on your course you would then allow him or her to work with you?

ED BERMAN:
No. We don't have a 'system'. They can go off and do what they like. Our overall co-operative has implications far beyond the sessions. Many people might use session techniques more comfortably in their own life-style.

INTERVIEWER:
They can do what they like on their own? Form their own groups?

ED BERMAN:
People have got to be responsible for themselves. I mean, what we have got is simply a technical method that anyone can use in small group work. We are not creating a mystique. It is an open-ended method, which means that somebody may come and spend forty hours and find that, in relation to their own skill pattern, their own life-style, and their own work, a couple of hours of it was extremely useful, maybe that all of it was useful, or maybe that none of it was useful. So, you see, because of the technical approach, people can take certain techniques and build them into their own skill patterns. We are not talking about a belief and we are not talking about a system which says that you have to have A, B and C in order to get D. It may well be that this should be what we must talk about, but I don't believe that yet, and it certainly hasn't been proved to me. So it is this open-mindedness, an open-endedness, that characterises what we do, and we have a great belief in other people's responsibility. I mean, we are very interested that people with other disciplines come on this course and don't treat it as an initial thing, but as a post-something course; if they are a mechanic, or an accountant, or a teacher, or whatever, that has its own discipline. And this might be a useful thing, both personally and in terms of teaching or doing small group work, to be added to the arsenal of their own skills.

INTERVIEWER:
What have you personally felt about the group work you have done? I know you don't talk about success. What do you feel that the abnormal mentally ill people who have come to your sessions have gained?

ED BERMAN:
I have no way of evaluating that, because we are only beginning to talk about it in non-subjective terms, and trying to set up some objective criteria whereby one can measure this, because that kind of measurement is what certain schools of thought believe in. I am sceptical about both the subjective and the objective measurement. I mean, subjectively, many people have said very nice things about the work. The one thing you can say is that this rule of thumb we have, of being invited back to certain situations, is a useful guideline for evaluating whether those people enjoy it or find it useful. Now how you evaluate whether it is doing any good or not is quite another question, and I wouldn't presume to talk about it, although people we run the groups for—that is, people who are organising youth centres or hospitals or whatever—seem to feel that it is useful. But what standards do they use? You see, that is one of the great problems in a normative society—most of the standards are unchallenging, and so they say: 'this is successful because they are smiling'. or 'this is successful because they have learned something'. That is the basic one, of course; if you can test something and show there has been an increase in information at a certain measurable level, then that is considered to be a successful educational experience, which is to me a great piece of nonsense, because education, at least in part, has to be about the creation of relationships. Whereas education has come to mean, in great part, the dissemination of units of knowledge, and development of personality and relationships has been left out to a large degree. To us, relationship is both a beginning and an end of the educational process. Seen in a dynamic context, there is no beginning or end, but if you want to take it more formally, then any educational system or any educational approach should have as one basic criterion, relationships, and not simply knowledge—that is not to disregard knowledge. The simple dissemination of knowledge seems to me to be a technological barbarism of the first order, and that is what we are all trapped in. There are certain economic reasons for this, perhaps.

INTERVIEWER:
Is "Inter-Action"—the word 'inter-action', a key to what you are doing?
ED BERMAN:
Yes, the name “Inter-Action” has a number of implications and it clearly means that we see a very fluid relationship between different things, people, structures, environments; and we take this dynamic relationship to be a useful model in determining behaviour. However, it is also very clear that the way people in general function in order to handle the great mass of information and experiences is that we tend to—we have to perhaps—compartmentalise things, and we take those rigid semantic compartments as being a true description of reality (whatever the words ‘true’ and ‘reality’ may mean in this context). We tend therefore to deal with the secondary descriptions of things rather than the matter itself.

Instead of dealing with a person as an individual, we will probably deal with him in terms of our own preconception of him, in terms of our prejudices or ideas about his appearance and so on. And it may only be by accident that we ever get to know more about the person than his appearance. I take ‘appearance’ in the most general meaning—that of his actual physical existence in front of you.

Perhaps it is because of our tremendous affluence and over-population and the media and technology that we are forced to cut ourselves off, to compartmentalise and to deal with things in terms of their secondary characteristics (if we deal with them at all)—rather than themselves as a direct experience.

Compartmentalising and isolating oneself is not simply an individual intellectual’s experience, however. Neither is it simply an individual psychological experience, but rather it is a mass experience, a social one. There are too many people locked into an impoverished and irrelevant outdated value system. It is not simply because there are too many people around that we make superficial choices in order to protect ourselves. It is far more complex than that.

Any planner or statistician can prove to us all that there is enough room for everyone in the world; there are plenty of economists around who would be delighted to ‘prove’ that all of us in the world and more can be supported on this planet if distribution were more equitable. What is left out of all these arguments is usually the grist of the matter—us. That is to say, for the theoreticians we are packages (or should I say packets) of prejudices (call them education and experience). They believe that people can be dealt with like packs of cards when they make important decisions concerning whole masses, as in the case of new towns or cities. And yet, they talk hypocritically about the intellectual issues of freedom and equality as if these were divorced from eating and sleeping.

Thus, we have an enormous population, able to increase ad lib because of scientific advances and technology, dedicated to producing more consumers for that science and technology; thus, we support more and more people at a higher average material level than ever before. But in emotional and social terms we are perhaps less stable and less enriched than ever before. We are unable to understand and develop our relationships to things and people. And the ideas, the values, by which we judge these things were developed by an elite in the 18th and 19th centuries, who lived in a population one-tenth the present size. Furthermore, those who were allowed to participate actively in the politics of the society then were a mere fraction of today’s ‘democracy’.

Is it any wonder, with those precious ideas in our minds (conceivably practicable in an earlier elitist ‘democracy’), that we should come to grief when confronted with the inconceivable factors of mass x media x technology? We are emotional striplings lost in plastic woods.

If then, you want to talk about alienation, about cutting oneself off from the vast variety of things/experiences impinging on our perception all the time, you must also talk about the (mental) set or filter that we have been given through our education, by which we evaluate or try to deal with these experiences. If you take the over-population/media/technology/affluence on the one side and the outmoded value system through which we view things on the other, and you couple these to our frail individual existence among a mass of similarly bewildered cousins, what would you expect as a result? The Garden of Eden, where there were two persons, one serpent, and a writer with a sense of humour? Or would you expect something even worse than we now find?

INTERVIEWER:
So you mean we, in fact, emphasise the wrong things in our lives.

ED BERMAN:
Well, you see, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ become a very difficult nub of the matter, because our value system is in flux. I mean, what is right? Is it right to just survive? Is it wrong just to survive? I mean, if somebody finds a modus vivendi which happens to enable them to live a life completely without particular problems, and they go through without looking to the right or to the left, without seeing the problems of the society they are involved in, is this right or wrong?

Now you come into the area of metaphysics and
you come into the area of beliefs. We have so many beliefs based on so little knowledge. Perhaps our beliefs should be developed from what is, insofar as we can understand and describe it, rather than being preconceptions. But suspending judgment pending evidence is not a basic element in our educational system. Being right or wrong is. There are so many important questions that are not susceptible to quantifiable factual answers, yet we demand such answers, and we want them now.

INTERVIEWER:
Well, how do you believe society could be changed from the very materialistic, media-conscious society which you obviously feel it is?

ED BERMAN:
Well, I don't believe that society can be changed from a media-orientated or media-driven or materialistic system, and I'm not sure that's the heart of the problem. That's perhaps a superficial part of the problem. In itself, an efficient means of organising something is not necessarily good or bad. I mean, it may, for instance, provide you with more time to do other things that you prefer. It may, on the other hand, be so authoritarian that it turns your stomach and hurts a lot of other people. So, technique and method are not necessarily good or bad.

INTERVIEWER:
Can one define normal behaviour?

ED BERMAN:
For what it's worth, it can be defined statistically. I mean, you set up a certain base line standard, and you say: 'according to this particular standard, most people are doing this or that', and the thing most people are doing is a norm. There's nothing magical about it, there's nothing preconceived about it, and there's nothing absolute about it. It happens to be a relatively fluid thing. It changes perhaps all too slowly, but that norm is a statistical analysis. It is a bulge in your curve, so to speak. And the people who are on the extreme are 'by that standard' abnormal. Fair enough.

What that has to do with what should be is quite another question.

I mean, I just don't like dealing in terms like 'normal'. They don't have a great deal of meaning for me except in terms of being able to talk to somebody else about what seems to exist statistically in the population; but one has to be obviously immensely more accepting of what exists, of idiosyncracies if you like, or the fact that there are so many differences, and one has to try to deal with them. Now, one may not like a lot of them, but I don't mean one has to say 'I like the differences'. One merely can be useful socially by saying 'I will tolerate, to some degree, the differences until they become irresponsible'.

I find it difficult to accept the slogans of the underground, and, indeed, the simple-minded slogans of groups who would have us believe that 'love is all' because, if love exists, there must be another facet to it, perhaps its opposite. Paradoxically, the trend-merchants are usually motivated by the opposite.

If each person must be able to do his own thing, which is a favourite slogan, then one must be sure, when doing one's own thing, that one is not stopping other people from doing their own thing. And how do you begin to evaluate this personally? It's very, very difficult, and we have many examples in the arts world. It is only now becoming clear that things like the arts labs which were set up for people to do their own things in had by and large no relationship to their communities at all. They had only a relationship with the people involved in the buildings, doing their own things. This 'movement' seemed to me to be a flash in the pan because that number of people is miniscule compared to the amount of resources they are demanding. If they could make their thing relevant to the communities in which they were lodged or to other isolated communities which we find ourselves creating—like institutionalised communities—then there might be a good claim on the part of these people for letting them have resources to do their own thing, in a social context; but it's very difficult to make that kind of demand so selfishly on a society which is already inequitably distributing its resources.

INTERVIEWER:
And selfishness means that some people get left out.

ED BERMAN:
Selfish, the way you used it, is an emotive word. You see, I believe that selfishness is important—that 'self-ishness' is important. I believe that I should satisfy myself to some degree, but that doesn't have to be incompatible with its by-products being socially beneficial as well. Indeed, a useful rule of thumb is that if the satisfaction of myself in its by-products doesn't hurt anybody else, then I might say that what I am doing is valid; and if it's useful to other people then it might be worth continuing. Instead of getting hung up on the emotional, traditional words like 'selfish', one should see in a more dynamic way how this affects you in relation to other people. This is very important, because the word 'selfish' (or 'unselfish') in itself
gets us nowhere; it's simply a moral vestige of a past which we would perhaps be better freed from.

Let's talk about the question of the dividing line between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. We should perhaps start from 'who are we talking about?', 'to whom should it be acceptable?' as opposed to 'what should be done?'. It is clear that the great majority of people are relatively conservative, relatively narrow-minded, relatively frightened; most of us perhaps fall into that category. Experience is going to be slightly unacceptable, and the farther we move outside our normal experience, the more unacceptable it becomes. Now, the questions should be: should we allow a standard of unacceptability to put a barrier up against these things? or should we try — and I think we will all agree that we should—to expand people's experience and consciousness to such a degree that they are able to accept more and more? The question is therefore not 'that we should do this'. It never has been the real question. That is what inter-action is about. The question is not 'should we do it?' or 'why should we do it?' or 'what should we do?', but 'how can we do it?'—how can we expand people's tolerance, their acceptance of the 'abnormal'? This is a thing Inter-Action has specialised in, and this is perhaps why we have survived. Because we are not talking about airy-fairy ideas. We are not talking about theories. We were not set up from an ideological viewpoint, either political, psychiatric or social. We have come together because there are certain means, techniques of working, which other people who have joined me have found acceptable to them, and useful in their social application.

After learning the 'how', we will want to see 'why' and 'what', but the original question is 'how' and 'where'. This is terribly important, because you can spend, as most academics do, all your life sitting, or attempting to sit, on the head of a pin, debating on whether you should be sitting there at all, and never do a thing, wasting an enormous amount of ability and time, when the answers have to come fairly quickly.

They have to come quickly, because there are too many people making too many demands on too inflexible a society with too little goodwill. I think that is the formula for a pressure-cooker which is about to explode.

ED BERMANN:
Well, we see that there are people with whom I have attempted to work who have what is called personality disorders. For one reason or another they are unable to handle a certain aspect of their personal relationships, and tend in many cases to want to destroy themselves or somebody else. Both of which are considered to be abnormal or anti-social. To kill oneself is still, if not a crime, then a deadly sin.

INTERVIEWER:
Has one the right to go ahead and kill oneself?

ED BERMANN:
It depends on how you want to do it, I think.

INTERVIEWER:
Well, for instance, drugs.

ED BERMANN:
Well, now you are asking a particular question. It is perhaps easier to answer. There seems no doubt in my mind about the fact that people have a right to kill themselves. The question to me is how. If you went off into the woods some place and you dug a hole for yourself and you buried yourself and died, I can see that you should have a right to do that. If, on the other hand, you wanted to kill yourself over twenty years' time and the process was so extended and so socially involved that it required the work of forty other people to commiserate with you and keep you together for twenty years, then I feel that socially speaking, and in terms of what we can afford, in terms of our emotions, even in terms of money — in terms of the resources of a society whose resources are not particularly equitably distributed anyway—you are perhaps making too great a demand on those resources.

INTERVIEWER:
And on everybody else . . .

ED BERMANN:
Well, yes, the resources being in a sense everybody else, because I see the whole thing as a total, dynamic and very involved social situation. So I don't see myself as being responsible for you, if you want to do something, without my agreeing to it, that is going to require an awful lot of my time, because you have decided that this is a great joy and a gay thing for you to do. If you want to do it, and it doesn't involve the unwilling and unwitting complex assistance of a large number of other people, by all means go ahead. But the unfortunate thing is that we are not educated in the real results, dangers or benefits of these things.

INTERVIEWER:
Have your own ideas of what is normal and what is abnormal been changed at all by your experience in the sessions at the Henderson hospital? Do you feel at all that the barriers are beginning to fall down?
We are still in a witch-doctor situation in relation to many things, because there is so much emotion, so little knowledge and so little objectivity involved—no wonder we have witch hunts.

But if our educational system were geared to developing personality, personal growth and responsible relationships, and people taking on responsibility for themselves while engendering a group empathy, and if this individual versus group thing in itself was in a balance, then one would answer the question very simply. If you wanted, tomorrow, to take an overdose of drugs, and its implications were that you had a right to choose freely whether to live or to die, then it would make little sense to me to say that you had no right to do that. But to come back to the example, if what you really wanted to do was in some way to demand the attention of a lot of other people, and you felt you had a right to do that, then one has to go by a very basic rule of thumb (which comes from Kant, perhaps), that one has to extend your right to everybody else in your society. Our society is (and this is not even a cliché any more) a global society—therefore everyone else in the world now has that right. Whether we can afford to let everyone logically impose the demand on twenty other people’s time is a simple question. It is totally illogical to allow that.

INTERVIEWER:
Should we prohibit people from using drugs then?

ED BERMAN:
The question is relative and very complex. Simply because it is illogical to involve so many other people and so unfair, does not rule it out unfortunately, as a course of action. You should ask whether we should tolerate it. Of course we should tolerate it while working with real education at every level of the problem.

INTERVIEWER:
Are we as a society very intolerant? Do you think?

ED BERMAN:
Well, compared to some ideal society, yes. Compared to America, no. Compared to South Africa, no. What question are you asking? Are you saying: do I feel that certain elements in the establishment, from some psychiatric care services to some police to some politicians, are unfair to certain groups of people? I would have to answer that in relation to each group, and I would quite often say ‘yes’; there are obvious examples of unfairness. Just as I would also say the thing is made into a great bogeyman and blown completely out of proportion. There is a tremendous amount of freedom, and for most people relatively little persecution of the type that is often emphasised in the press. Now that does not in any way whitewash the establishment, or make it any less odious. It does not on the other hand give carte blanche to people to manipulate emotions in a few cases. The thing is very emotional. Many readers of this magazine use drugs and will never be bothered by anyone, I am sure. ‘Drugs’ is much more abused on both sides (by the establishment especially), than is the touting of football tickets, for example. That is a much less emotional issue because the sale of football tickets does not challenge a hitherto unknown (taboo) territory. It isn’t a burning social issue, is it? We are used to it. But drugs (on a large scale) are new and alien to our society, and we have not had time to make it a norm of some kind. It too will become normative, in the way that these things get assimilated, one way or another.

Under the government urban programme the borough of Camden has been allotted £108,000. Two projects will benefit, the Agar Grove day nursery, and the Inter-Action Trust.

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