GROUP PSYCHOTHERAPY AND THE NUCLEAR ISSUE: A PERSPECTIVE OF HOPE

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The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbances of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction. It may be that in this respect precisely the present time deserves a special interest. Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man. They know this, and hence comes a large part of their current unrest, their unhappiness, and their mood of anxiety.

Sigmund Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents, 1930

Why should the group therapist be concerned with the nuclear issue? None of us likes to think about it. None of us likes to talk about it. Yet, like it or not, the threat remains present on the fringes of our consciousness. It is in the newspapers. Our children, perhaps silently, think about it. Our patients occasionally mention it in sessions. And we, too, occasionally find ourselves worrying about it.

Nothing is so unpleasant as thinking about our own death—except thinking about the death of everything that makes life enjoyable for us. As psychotherapists we are supposed to be able to think about things that others are afraid to think of—suicide, murder, perversion, despair. Yet, of course, we are like our patients, at times are patients ourselves, and we don’t want to think about the things that are most painful.

Why should we?

First, as therapists we have a commitment to the truth, to truly perceiving reality. Second, as psychotherapists we must help our patients confront their fears, and to do so we must confront our own. Third, we may be able to act constructively.
A PSYCHOANALYTIC UNDERSTANDING OF THE NUCLEAR ISSUE

The psychology of the nuclear issue can be approached on three levels—intrapsychic, large-group, and cultural.

On an intrapsychic level, we all find ourselves with unacceptable feelings—wishes to be destructive, desires for supreme magical power, and fear of death. These three experiences form the psychological core of the nuclear problem. Nuclear weapons are an externalization of the historic, deep-seated urges present in all humankind since the beginning of civilization—the urge to be destructive and the urge for power—unchecked by our normal fear of death.

I believe that any one of us who takes the time and effort to look within can discover these urges. The problem is that the experiences, for the most part, are not conscious. This seems to be for two reasons. First, we employ a variety of mental operations to prevent ourselves from being aware of our nuclear feelings. These include defenses on an individual level, defenses on a large-group (national and international) level, and cultural attitudes.

Second, the very nature of nuclear anxiety—the fear that our friends and family and civilization may die in addition to us—is a new anxiety in the history of humanity. It arouses the deepest fear of our childhood, of a time when we and the world were one, and so a disturbance in the world felt like an inner, and unendurable, catastrophe.

Certain individual defensive operations are of particular importance in nuclear considerations. One is what psychiatrist Robert Lifton has so vividly described as “nuclear numbing.” This is a particular deadening of internal emotional life, such that emotional responsiveness to multiple aspects of human experience, in addition to the nuclear threat, is blunted in order to spare the individual from unendurable emotional pain from the reality of nuclear war. A second is simple outright denial: “I don’t want to think about it.” A third is the familiar isolation of affect: “I know about it already (but I don’t want to feel it).”

Extremely important are certain mental processes that are defensive in nature but that are accepted as natural in the nuclear situation. These include the complex of defenses that might be called “defensive regression to helplessness and powerlessness.” Included in this are the “leave it to the experts” attitude, whether the experts be political or scientific. This assumes that these experts are in fact wiser or more capable to deal with these issues than we, although all evidence indicates that our political and scientific leaders are at least as helpless as the average citizen on the nuclear issue.

Also included in this complex is the experience of powerlessness. Powerlessness is defensive in three ways. First, it ignores important aspects of reality. Recent American history shows that public opinion in the long run can produce major changes in political and social issues. Second, the experience of powerlessness is defensive in that it protects us from the anxiety of being involved in a process which we are not sure, after all, we can conduct to a safe conclusion. In other words, if there is nothing I can do, then I don’t have to feel fear of nuclear war, and I don’t have to feel bad about trying to do something and not being sure it will succeed. Hence powerlessness operates as a defense against nuclear anxiety.

Third, the experience of powerlessness is often a response to feelings of having to do more than is realistic. We respond to the nuclear threat with a grandiose wish—the threat is so awful that only an immense act is worth undertaking. When the immense act, of course, proves impossible, we are left feeling powerless. We forget that in the nuclear issue, as in other issues in our lives, small positive steps are what ultimately solve our problems.