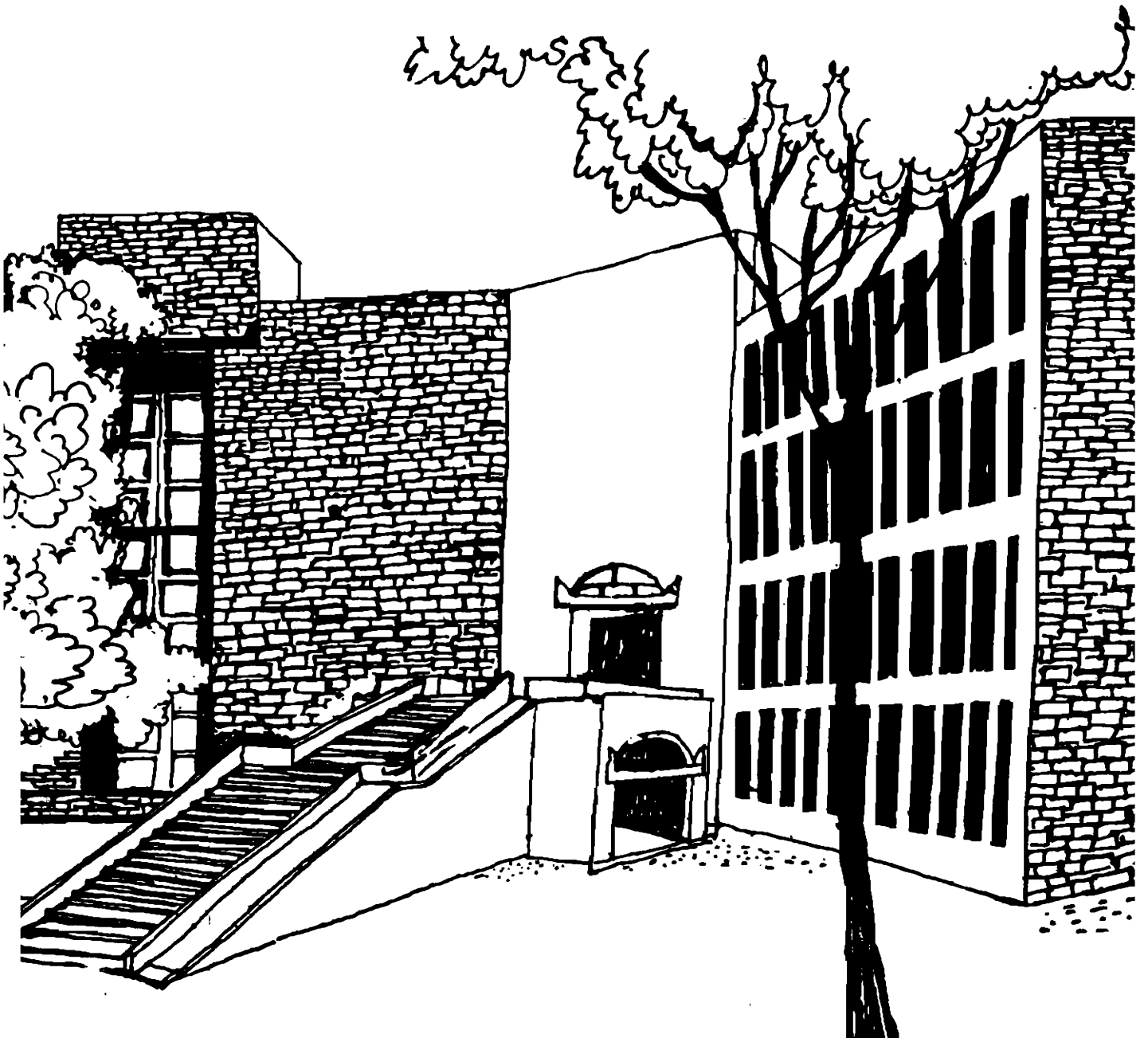




Working Paper



PERSONAL GROWTH LABORATORY
A PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY

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**PERSONAL GROWTH LABORATORY
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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the evolution and transformation of what is known as Laboratory Training or Personal Growth Labs or PG Labs. The experience of the participants in the lab is for the self to explore the inner world of feelings and meanings around relationships and quest for purpose and meaning of existence. A lab needs to be anchored in the socio-cultural context and larger human existence. An individual explores the myths, epics, folklore, folktales, role models from family sagas, literature, history and other deeply embedded codings and experiences of his/her growing up. The personal growth lab provides a space to experience the individuals being by reflecting on the configuration of experiences, differentiating elements of being and non being, positive energy and negative energy and giving direction to the unfolding of the being.

The paper explores the four themes of (1) invitation versus compulsion to explore, (2) the lab space in time and movement versus the concept of ownership, (3) role of the participants and the role of the anchor person, (4) directionality versus specificit, (5) unfolding the person versus boundaries of growth. The lab space is the sacred space where encounters are with the infinity of the self and touching ones own magic and mystery of human existence.

PERSONAL GROWTH LABORATORY

A Personal Philosophy

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Laboratory Training has undergone many transformations. Beginning with what is called T groups there have been many approaches to work with human beings who are in search to discover and get in touch with their own inner world of feelings and meanings. This search is as old as the times when human beings came into existence. Human beings have asked many questions about themselves, the reasons and purpose of their existence, the world around them and the meaning of their life. The quest for discovery is deep in Indian civilisation and civilisations across the world have evolved philosophy, religions, traditions and rituals, code of conduct, values, beliefs and norms to define and design what human beings ought and ought not to do.

My very first such formal encounter was in the undergraduate education at the University of Rochester in New York State. I took an elective course as it offered many possibilities of exploration about the self. The course had a philosophical orientation and was based on open dialogues and discussions. The first encounter with this course was the discovery that this course was not in the class room. We used to go to the park nearby and sit under the trees and reflect on our lives, the roles each one was taking/playing in life, the nature of relationships we encountered both enduring and social and the philosophy both societal and personal that we lived by. The experience in this lab was thought provoking. The group and the faculty facilitated articulation of inner thoughts and feelings about people and meanings of relationships which were socially not considered desirable or acceptable. These shavings were without evaluations or judgements about whether they were right or wrong. The sheer process of open exploration and voicing of the inner feelings created an immense release. Although the experience in this lab and one more advanced Lab was very enriching the assumptions of the concerned faculty about the nature of social

relationships and institutions of living were rooted in the western philosophy of social living and religion. Logically many statements and reflections made sense. However, emotionally the social and cultural codings of role taking and social relationships anchored deeply in the Indian tradition came in conflict with the assumptions and philosophy about society, culture and relationships of the west.

This was the earliest recognition of the fact that though the structure and content of relationships, interactions and transactions may be similar in form, the underlying processes are unique and specific to each society and culture. Logically and rationally the options and action choices may be attractive, however, the new beginnings in action and implementation are very difficult.

The next encounter of a lab experience occurred in the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad in a second year elective course offered by Professor Pulin K Garg titled Inter-Personal Relations where I was a participant. Participation was possible as I joined as a research associate to work with Prof. Garg. Subsequent to this a whole series of experiences followed as a participant in many labs. By this time the lab as an experience of personal growth to touch the self, give shape to the role, redefine relationships, redesign systems, discover the moreness of the self, and the whole issue around experiencing ones being and becoming started to unfold. These were the labs where the association with epics, myths, folklore, folktale, family sagas, literature, history, parables and symbols as deeply embedded in the identity began to be sensed and felt. The experiences of growing up, the codings of the significant people, the belonging to the system, the shaping of the child to be female or male, the significance given to the child by the family and society based on gender and the experienced feelings of hurt, anguish, pain, sorrow, anger and resentment on the one hand and the small bitter sweet memories of nostalgic childhood began to acquire meaning and clarity. What also became apparent was that given all the socialisation there is also the reality of the identity who converges all the experiences into a direction and an action stance.

The recognition was that the psyche has energy. The psyche pulls a configuration of encounters with the world outside and it is the identify who makes a choice amongst all

the alternatives. These choices have to be decoded at various levels of meanings. The child encounters, experiences and internalizes the messages of the significant people and system at how one holds the body and various parts of the body, transactions with the people in the primary family as well as outside, the socio-psychological context of the family and belonging system and the existential and spiritual identity of the self. All these codings in the psyche have a socio-cultural component from the epics, myths, folklore, and folktales, literature, family sagas of villains and heroes, historical role models, parables and symbols. Within the context of these layers of experiences of thousands of years and ones own life time of experiences as one is growing up all add up to the positive or negative energy of the psyche. And all of these then cohere and converge to the emergence of being or non-being.

The personal growth labs provides a space to experience the being by reflecting on the configuration of the experiences into non-being and negative energy and unfolding and touching of the positive energy and the being.

Until this time the focus of all these labs where I was a participant was the unfolding of the self and walking down the memory lane to reexperience the events, people, feelings and the residues of transactions. The reliving of the experiences released a whole lot of energy frozen in the deeply coded - meanings creating inhibitions and barriers to creativity. This exploration freed the action choices and energy for new beginnings with the self.

Then came the opportunity for attending the ISABS Training for Trainers Programme. ISABS was a newly set up institution by the eminent Behavioural Scientists of the country. The founders were full of enthusiasm to make a beginning with process work. Like any new beginning and creation of an institution there was lot of hope and aspiration to make it a success. These group of founders were the pioneers who were breaking new ground and creating a new path. To be part of such a growing institution which was being shaped was an opportunity.

I joined in the first ever programme held for training those people who were aspiring to become trainers. For me this was a shift in my focus of exploration as the entry into formal training meant choosing a path for professionalism. I was making a departure from the earlier focus of exploration and experience of personal growth to a directionality of a career and a profession.

The journey was arduous. The encounters with various identities of the self in the journey reflected encountering traditional expectations of a woman's role and location in the social order. The images and expectations were of roles of which were deeply rooted in the social order and prescriptions. These roles I had lived by but today were not adequate or sufficient. What I discovered was that the psychodrama of my own role and location in the family and the dynamic interplay of the roles in the group were a replay of putting myself in the social context of my past where I was pulled by the expectations of the system and the traditions and pushed by my own identity to make new choices. The new choices had a price and the dilemma was whether to pay the price and stand alone or not to pay the price of choice but pay the price by default.

The first internship programme in ISABS in 1973 was a dramatic and traumatic experience unforgettable but which also determined my effort to walk the unknown and uncertain path. Then came ISISD for sixteen years and now Sumedhas Academy For Human Context.

This intertwining of personal history of growth to the ISABS as an institution and today to be a faculty, a resource person and an anchor of the group has been necessary and important to state the personal philosophy and assumptions about Lab work. Now twenty years have passed since I acquired my credentials to be a trainer and an anchor person. I have offered many personal growth labs. Over the years, I have crystalized some values anchored in a philosophy of process work and anchoring labs. Some of these values are a continuity of the values internalized through lab experiences while some others have evolved over a period of time being in labs with many different groups. Some of these I am conceptualising and stating below.

1. INVITATION VERSUS COMPULSION TO EXPLORE: Labs are held and offered in many ways. A course in an educational institution which has many names like Personal Growth, Inter-Personal Relations or Explorations in Role and Identity or a Lab in a Management Development Programme or Management Education Programmes has many names like Managerial Role and Identity or Self Renewal which are either be optional or compulsory depending upon the institution and the person offering it. Elective courses where individuals have a choice come with clear or unclear and confused reasons why they wish to participate. The events where there is no choice for example in an ongoing MDP (Management Development Programme) there are many who wish to participate by choice or curiosity and many who are resentful because of the compulsion of the system or the authority. Whether by choice or by compulsion once in the lab it is the pull of the space wherein participants enter or do not enter the space to participate. The role of the anchor person is to open the space and invite the participants. There cannot be any compulsions from the anchor person or the group. The only pressure can be internal and the pull of the space. One of the significant recognition and awareness is that there is a time for each individual to enter the lab space. The individual is either ready or not ready. When a person makes choice to enter the quality of exploration and the unfolding of the person is different than the person who is compelled by the anchor person to participate. As such, the anchor person can only invite and reflect on the stances taken by the individual and not create compulsions so as to experience success or failure for the anchor person.

2. THE LAB SPACE IN TIME AND MOVEMENT VERSUS THE CONCEPT OF OWNERSHIP

There is a clear distinction between the lab space and the anchor person. The anchor person is not the lab space. The invitation to the participants is to enter the lab space and explore the self in its infiniteness and finiteness of the roles, the being and the non being and processes of being and becoming and any other growing up experiences. The role of the anchor person if he/she becomes the owner of the space then the dynamics of the lab revolves around the anchor person as an individual with his/her issues and the interplay between the participants and the anchor person acquires far greater significance than the exploration of the self by the participants.

The lab space is a shared space amongst the participants and the anchor person. The space is there to bring the self for sharing and reflection. The space has no ownership but only the co-ordinates of time, structure linked to the external interface of the system, institution where the lab is held and an invitation. The space has no ownership of any participant or the anchor person. The lab space is there and can be evoked to invite the participants. The role of the anchor person is to voice the invitations of the space and have the coordinates and boundaries of eternal time and finite time clear. The space has a macro infinite coordinates as well as finite coordinates. The role of the anchor person of the space is to live with the interplay of the two - the macro and the micro-and to provide the context where the participants can locate themselves in the space and can begin the process with themselves.

3. ROLE OF THE PARTICIPANTS AND THE ROLE OF THE ANCHOR PERSON

The role of participants and anchor person are different but both are in the shared space. This needs to be stated and shared. However, the experienced reality is also that no amount of clarity about the lab space and the roles register psychologically in the minds of the participants. As such, there are always confusions. The deeply embedded social and psychological role codings of relationships in the primary system viz. the family and the experiences of early educational institutions are deeply coded and operative both in the participants and the anchor person. In my value system and belief the clarity of the role of the anchor person in a lab setting primarily rests with the anchor person. When the anchor person confuses the role of an anchor of the space with his/her role as that of a leader or owner of the space the consequences are disastrous. For example, the primary evocation of the lab space is that of exploration of the universe of the person in the context of the world the person lives in. The anchor person may take the person to explore the universe the anchor person is caught in. This may lead to a turmoil and entrenchments between the participant and the anchor person, and the role and authority of the anchor person. The participant gets relocated in the earlier experienced socio-psychological world of no space for the self compulsions and operations. The lab space is a sacred and a shared space. Each one offers what he/she wishes to offer. The anchor person reflects like a mirror what

he/she sees, hears, touches and feels and locates it in the larger universe of myths, epics, folktales, folklore, history, literature, family and personal sagas and the meanings and implications of the statements and sharings. The anchor person goes behind the events, encounters, experiences, feelings and meanings of transactions and their residues and articulates the processes of the identity and the being of the person.

4. DIRECTIONALITY VERSUS SPECIFICITY

There is a predisposition of the participants to begin by stating an event based narration or problem centered narration. The lab and specially the anchor person does not provide specific solutions to specific problems of the participants. What the lab or the anchor person does is to state and locate the themes, dilemmas and issues in a context and paints the universe of the socio-psychological world the participant lives in. Through explorations the anchor person states the directionality from which the participant can make his/her own choices. However, if the anchor person translates the exploration of the socio-psychological world with layers of experiences, encounters and feelings into specific relationships and problem sets and provides solutions, this process leads to reinforcement of the experience of the participant to the anchor person dependency and putting the anchor person above the self. This process then reinforces the continuity of the social system where the person experiences himself /herself as secondary and less than the significant people's status in the primary system.

Culturally, this process is a seductive process whereby the relationship between teacher-taught and Guru-Shisya tradition anchored in ancient times can take over. Often a statement, a reflection, an observation and a sharing from the anchor person can be experienced and taken as the final word carved in stone and the only path or choice available to the participant. This process takes away the freedom of choice and falls back on the choice of the anchor person. The value here is that the anchor person can reflect on the directions the participant can choose from rather than providing solutions or specific alternatives which takes away the choices.

5. UNFOLDING OF THE PERSON VERSUS BOUNDARIES OF GROWTH

The lab space is that space where the space, the human beings and their universe unfold. This space is a sacred space and the sharing and reflections of life of the person are also sacrosacnt in the space. The individual protagonist who begins his/her journey of exploration may find barriers and distortions in the water when he/she sees and hears the echoes and shadows of his/her life. However, the protagonist has offered and received an invitation to himself/herself to review and reflect upon life and to walk the path of self discovery. The lab space needs to differentiate between the exploration of unfolding and the fears, anxieties and terrors of unfolding and as such define boundaries of exploration. For example, touch is a central and critical theme of exploration in the personal growth labs of any groups and the physical human touch the most hankered for. However, the search for this touch can transform itself into ones own deeply experienced denials and deprivations and as such touch becoming a means to compensate for all the losses. Here, the process of unfolding becomes a search of unending compensations and walls get created to put boundaries on the unfolding of the protagonists. The lab space and the anchor person needs to differentiate between the human touch and the touch across men-women as adults.

In a lab space and setting the most sensitive exploration is around man-woman issue. Around this exploration a whole lot of contamination, violations and expression of aggression can occur. An anchor person whether a male of a female with unresolved issues around male/female identity and with past haunting residues can violate the sacred trust around man-woman relationships in the lab space. The process of unfolding and ones own experiences of unfolding awakens the being of the person. There is a feeling of getting in touch with the spirit of the being and the existence which transcends the social, psychological and role codings. In that time, moment, and space rationality logic and analytical processes are suspended. In this time and space the unfolding and experiences of the being attempting to touch the completeness and infiniteness of the self may create an expression of the being in its totality. However,

this is also the moment when the being needs to integrate itself with the self and experience the well being and wholesomeness with itself rather than in the expression around man-woman encounter to experience the completeness and fulfillment. Per say man-woman encounter is not a social and moral issue. However, the processes of unfolding in a lab space and encounter between man and woman specially around the participant and anchor person across gender needs to be addressed with utmost graciousness, dignity and sensitivity.

Many such exploration spaces get the aura of sexual freedom and licentiousness. In a personal growth lab space the exploration of man-woman encounter and sexuality add to the unfolding of the individuals universe and finds freedom from the undignifying and violating experiences. However, a choice of a new action freedom can only be a choice outside of the lab space to acquire an experience and meaning of a real choice. An action choice in the lab space is often out of gratitude and an offering which is resulting out of the euphoria of exploration and feelings of freedom from the past ghosts. An euphoric action choice and expression can add another set of baggage and lead to loss of freedom.

Personal Growth Lab is a time and a space for a pause and a moment to reflect and review ones life with others who are also taking that pause to reflect and review their life space. The process is a walk down the memory lane both nostalgic and painful anguished and joyous, of hurts and togetherness and a life full of many events, encounters of people and systems, experiences and residues. A lab is a space for constant unfolding of layers and layers of encounters and experiences and their residues in feelings and meanings. The lab space is a space for discovery of new paths for the self, new directions for the role and multiplicity of choices to live by. The experience of unfolding leads to growing up and maturity, owning up and accepting growth and accepting ones own location in the life space. The freedom is of making choices and accepting the price and its consequences. The challenge is to take charge of ones own destiny and life space and give it a shape.

In my experiences of participating in the first lab and many other such labs both for personal and professional growth and conducting many such labs as an anchor person

has been a long journey. The anchor persons in the labs I have been a participant have added richness and the labs I have been and am an anchor person create an ever unfolding experiences of human context which makes life meaningful and rich in its many hues and colours. There have been, are and continue to be many cotravellers who walk the path to discover the ever emerging infiniteness, the unfolding of the meanings and the richness of the encounters to experience the depth and substantiveness of life. Every offering of the personal growth lab to evoke the space for the self and others to creates a context for my personal unfolding and that of others and an ever renewed commitment to create time, a moment and a space where life space of human continuities can be explored from time immemorial with codings from myths, epics, folklore, folktales, history, individuals and family sagas come alive in the lab space. The experience is of touching the infinite of the self within the finite boundaries the flow of life from ancient times to today, from past to present - a unique juxtaposition of past, present and future where mysteries and mysticism of life and living slowly unravel in which I am a living part.