

Out of the shadows and into the spotlight

A personal account of the Twelfth European Groupwork Symposium

Paul Johnson

In August 1968, as a wee lad I can still recall my first visit to York. I remember going into York Minster and hearing about the death of the Duchess of Kent. It was also the same time that Russian tanks were on the streets in Czechoslovakia. I can still recall there being a great deal of excavation work. Apparently, at this time a great many Roman artifacts had been discovered under the site of the Minster.

Eleven years later, I found myself revisiting York, this time as an undergraduate student. Again, I was drawn by the Minster, the tiny narrow streets and also the numerous pubs. York always appeared so cozy, so comforting, with its Roman walls, which I guess were designed to keep people out. However, I always found them a way of keeping you in. The city's winding narrow streets seem to embrace you and take you wherever you need to go. There was no way you could ever get lost - always a plus for someone like me, with a terrible sense of direction.

Twenty-five years later, I once again had an opportunity to visit one of my favorite cities in England. For the past several years I had been encouraged to attend the European Groupwork symposium. However, for one reason or another I was never able to do so. However, 2007 was going to be different.

I have to admit that I was slightly nervous as the train approached York train station. Would the city be the same, who was going to be at the conference, would I have anyone to talk to, how would my presentation go? There was no need to worry because I hadn't been on the campus more than five minutes before several people came up and welcomed

me. And then the magic words, “so what time are we going to the pub?” Less than an hour later, there were at least 20 people heading off down the street looking to have a drink together and something to eat. Now in my world, life does not get much better than that.

This very welcoming and inclusive feeling permeated the whole conference. For example, the next morning at breakfast, people were sitting together who had only met for the first time the evening before. There were real conversations going on. People were genuinely interested in one another. What was even more wonderful was that this continued throughout the course of the symposium.

There were eight sessions scheduled from Monday morning through Tuesday afternoon. What was so marvellous was that everyone was able to go to all of the sessions. Perhaps I can attempt to put this in context. For the past several years I have attended each AASWG Symposium (Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups). I really look forward to attending this symposium, it is one of the best, meeting friends and colleagues and attending many of the presentations. However, the Symposium is always held in a large hotel, so I arrive at the hotel, check in, put my stuff away, turn on CNN or the weather channel and feel lonely and isolated. What was so different about York at St. Johns College was that I never felt that way. I was constantly surrounded by people. I don't mean to imply this in an overbearing way - I could also walk out of my room to go and sit in the gardens, take a walk and experience the city. Each time I attend the North American Symposium, I feel like I have just gone to a hotel which could have been anywhere. If any of you who are reading this piece receive the AASWG newsletter you will know that there is a logo of four people sitting on a park bench. Well, at York St Johns, I actually got to do this. This was no longer an abstract concept but real.

What is especially good about York is as I alluded to earlier, the way that the city embraces you. You feel not just welcome, but also significant and appreciated. These are the same principles we talk about in social work and groupwork; about being heard, respected and valued. At the symposium in York these principles were put into action. *Everyone* attended *all* the different sessions. It didn't matter if you had five weeks', five months', five years' or more experience, we were all included.

Everyone fully participated in all of the sessions because everyone felt that they had something to contribute. Also very refreshing was

the relatively large attendance by practitioners currently working in the field. Their comments were particularly insightful and their energy and enthusiasm was infectious.

As you will have gathered, everything about York was first class - the location, the people, the sessions, the food, the camaraderie, the 'glass on the grass' (wine in the open courtyard). I really felt that I had learned so much, plus I had such an enjoyable time. However, it wasn't until we were having our final wrap up meeting that it dawned on me that the theme of the symposium had been *Out of the Shadows*. This theme just didn't seem right; far from being in the background, everything I had heard and experienced was front and center.

Everything about the symposium put groupwork *in the Spotlight*. People were really applying and utilizing groupwork in the symposium itself. The examples of groupwork that we experienced and learned about were an important and significant component of everyone's practice, whether the groupwork was with children, adolescents, the elderly, in a hospital setting or at a college.

This realization made me feel about ten feet tall, no mean achievement for someone who is five feet seven on a good day. Frequently, in my professional experience, I have encountered opposition or reluctance to undertake groupwork. There always seemed numerous reasons not to do it. However, York really reinforced and confirmed for me how important and significant groupwork is. What was even more pleasing was the realization that the symposium in York had been a groupwork experience in itself.

So, to all of those who attended the symposium in York, thank you, it was absolutely wonderful. The location, the gardens, the park benches, the walks into the city, the full English breakfast each morning, the walks to the pub and the longer walks back to campus, the conversations, the stories and the laughter were brilliant. Just brilliant.

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