

News and Notes

By Walter A. Brumm

The Synanon community site, now the Marconi Conference Center outside of Marshall, California, was the setting for the thirty-third (2006) annual meeting of the Communal Studies Association. The tree-covered hills overlooking Tomales Bay formed a beautiful setting for the September 28-30 sessions. Although now a California state park, the site previously was home to the Marconi wireless receiving station, part of the Marconi Wireless Company; and from 1965 to 1980 it was Synanon's world headquarters. Like any number of organizations, Synanon did not begin as an alternative community but evolved into one after 1969.

Holding the CSA annual meeting in California—home of many communes emerging out of the social protest of the 1960's—encouraged current communitarians as well as former members to participate in the proceedings. The catalyst, however, was Tim Miller, program chairperson and author of several books on communes of that era. Among the groups represented were the Source Family, Reba Place, Morning Star Ranch, the Bruderhof, Children of God, Buffalo Creek, a commune in Taos, and Synanon. First-hand experiences as well as critical interpretations of communal life complemented one another. Conference papers were supplemented by song, dance and video presentations. The multidimensional approach to understanding the communal experience created a lively program.



Francie Levy and Elena Broslovsky

Thursday afternoon's opening tour of the Synanon site was given by Elena Broslovsky and Francie Levy, former members of that community. This useful orientation began on the relatively flat land below the conferees' lodgings, known by the Synanites as the "caves," which originally accommodated married couples. The cluster of buildings below the caves predates Synanon, although



The Marconi hotel, later the headquarters and dormitory for Synanon

they formed the hub of that community. The central structure was a large hotel with an Italianate veranda that overlooked Tomales Bay. Originally constructed to house the bachelor employees of the Marconi company, this 1913 building became the operations center for Synanon, while the third floor served as a dormitory for single people. Although the building is now closed due to renovations, Elena and Francie quickly identified what had been. As they pointed to floors and windows, images of the activities that took place there transformed the vacant spaces.

To one side of the hotel were two house-sized buildings. Furthest from the Bay was the Hatchery, which, according to Elena, “was set up with a ‘nesting room’ for the woman and child most recently returned from the hospital The babies had a common sleeping room and a play room and the ... moms slept in other rooms We shared the child care including nursing each others babies so each mother could have a night off. ... It was incredible to come in to such a supportive nurturing environment. ... The closeness I experienced with mothers who shared the Hatchery with me, Valerie, Sandy and Terri is hard to describe. To awake in the middle of the night and comfort a crying baby who is not your own, expands the concept of motherhood and self.” Elena expressed the importance of the mutual care and assistance the women gave one another, and how for her the experience forged lifelong bonds between the mothers and the children.

To the south side of the hotel was the auditorium. Again, the descriptions provided by Francie and Elena oriented us to the place as it was

before renovation. Back then, Francie noted, the auditorium was where the “Synanon Stew”—a form of the “Game,” or in modern terminology, an encounter group—was held. The “Game” became a hallmark of Synanon and its philosophy. The “Stew” was an ongoing game which could go on for days and even months, “with new people entering and people leaving all the time.” While an expression of love, it involved uninhibited and often aggressive expression which forced players to reexamine their ideas and behaviors. The intention was to strip away hypocrisy and falseness so that the participants could achieve personal integrity and self-reliance. This was essential to the original focus of the group—to rehabilitate and reeducate ex-addicts and to enable them to resume life in society at large.

As the story of Synanon unfolded during the conference, it became clear that its failure was not the result of its basic tenets or communal organization, but from its growing isolation from the world beyond its borders. As it became more isolated, it became less tolerant of dissenting opinions, and more embroiled in very public disputes. One incident that captured the public’s attention occurred in October 1977, when two members placed a rattlesnake in the mailbox of the prosecuting attorney who had just won a legal judgment against Synanon.

Although originally antagonistic to religion, Synanon in 1974 declared itself a religion, and was granted tax-exempt status. Questions persisted, however, and the federal government began to investigate its business dealings. As a result, Synanon was stripped of its tax-exempt status in 1991. Loss of standing in the surrounding community was compounded by unpopular policy changes within the organization. Membership declined and Synanon subsequently disbanded.

Although Synanon was one important focus of the conference, its theme was the communal experience in general. The challenge in writing these “News and Notes” is not simply to narrate events or summarize what was presented; it is to highlight several particulars that render the spirit of the whole. Without claiming objectivity, I would like to share two ideas that I took from several conference sessions which continue to fascinate me.

A presentation by Charlene Peters and Yahavah Mathison, members of the Source Family, compared that group’s experiences in California and Hawaii. Differences in the social context accounted for the group’s success in one location but not in the other. In contrast to the popular affirmation and business success they enjoyed with their restaurant on

Sunset Strip, their attempts to establish business enterprises and to recruit members failed in Hawaii. Their arrival in Hawaii appears to have been negatively impacted by the public's attention to a simultaneous event, the Manson family murders. Publicity about Manson and his family created an atmosphere of suspicion and fear directed at other communal groups. The media constructed an image of communal society members as cult-like, with members blindly following their leader. New to Hawaii, the Source Family was not well-known and their organizational character appeared suspicious. Their success in California was made irrelevant by a generic image of communal families as dangerous cults. Although not physically attacked, its efforts were not supported by the community. Public perception shaped public action—in this case avoidance behavior—which caused the new business enterprises of the Source Family to fail. The way people think and perceive, regardless of the facts, has real consequences. The impact of context on the social construction of a commune's image could be the subject of a doctoral dissertation.

I would also like to mention a discussion I had with Ruth Lambach following Margaret Hollenbach's paper, "How a Commune became a Cult." The issue that intrigued us was how individual members of a group cede personal ideas of right and wrong to group control. What interactive processes within communal groups cause individuals to suspend their independent assessments of what is good, right or appropriate behavior? How much personal responsibility does a person give up when participating in a communal organization? Why do participants yield to what sociological literature calls "group think?" It appears that persons in a commune, as in professional organizations, quite unconsciously go along in order to get along.

These are my examples of noteworthy ideas from the papers and presentations given at the conference. I hope they provide some sense of the intellectual stimulation offered by the speakers. Of course other listeners might have selected other topics. In a subsequent "News and Notes" I hope to comment on a current video "Commune: Free Land For Free People," about persons involved in the Black Bear Ranch commune of the '60s and on a soon-to-be-released video on Jonestown. Let me also add here that a film is being made about the Source Family with the filmmakers accompanying members of the group to the conference.