

THE FORUM – A Way of Group-Communication with the aim of a culture of non-violence

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FORUM is a group facilitation to build self awareness, honest communication and trust in communities.

It is a creative way to hold personal sharings by providing a stage on which community members can make public their true motivations, deep feelings and ideas to their fellow bodies. Through transparent sharing, questions of daily life can become an invaluable focus and catalyst for individual and community growth.

Forum is designed to work with people who are living together, sharing a common vision and who are committed to certain values such as Self-responsibility, compassion, solidarity and truth.

In order to understand FORUM it is important to know that its main aim is to promote a culture of nonviolence. It's research is about the question: What mental, spiritual and social conditions are needed so that humans can live together in truth, solidarity and freedom. What is the source of violence – and how can we create conditions for a non-violent world?

Forums wants to support the transformation from a culture of violence to one that cooperates with life and living principles: from a culture of domination to one of partnership; from a culture of competition to one of cooperation; from a culture of exploitation to one of self awareness and compassion; from a culture of possessiveness to one of contact and intimacy.

This transformation process must happen on both an individual and societal level at the same time and it is this process which FORUM was created to serve. It does this by encouraging self awareness and self development, witnessed and supported by community colleagues.

What is FORUM?

FORUM is about liberation, understanding and communication NOW. It provides a framework for investigating human nature. FORUM is not therapy, nor is it a method in itself; rather, it is a ritualised form of communication designed to enhance transparency, spiritual growth and community.

FORUM is a special kind of communication process. It is a creative way for a group with a common vision and value system to create a safe space where members can share with the group in such a way that the consciousness of both the individual and the collective is raised. In the FORUM, the personal is transmuted to the universal - this is done by loosening identification with, and attachment to, emotional states through a light and nonjudgemental climate of caring and acceptance.

In part, Forum provides a stage for thoughts and feelings which are ever present in daily life but which lie veiled or suppressed out of fear of rejection or judgement. It is a vehicle designed to bring into group consciousness what has been, until now, only present in the individual's consciousness. In the course of this process of making the hitherto private public, implications and connections which may have only been latent may also surface. In a single Forum session several individuals may work, in a series of Forums everyone will have worked, and thus over time the Forum becomes a powerful basis for raising an intentional community's awareness through living personal examples.

The Forum is not, however, a collection of individual random personal sharings. Because it is informed from the beginning by a set of shared values and long term goals, what emerges is necessarily channeled and to some extent shaped by the community's commitment to personal change, honesty and aliveness.

In community it can be useful to separate problem solving and decision making. When a decision is to be made, it can start with a Forum process designed to make ideas, personal intentions or emotional background transparent. When this has happened, the decision making process can go ahead without being sabotaged by personal agendas.

Practised frequently in an ongoing group the Forum becomes ultimately like a school of life, a classroom devoted to the exploration of Life and Truth.

Sometimes you will be surprised what you say when you step fully into the role of the actor in the centre of the Forum and the process begins to flow. What emerges is the complexity of the human condition: its beauty, its potential, its paradoxes and its violence. In Forum you experience the echoes of human history reflected in the experience of individuals and all these discoveries pave the way for change and development.

How can FORUM promote Non-violence?

It is because of our fear of the insecurity and unpredictability of life that make us wanting to dominate. We fear the things which we cannot control or organise - feelings, longings, loneliness, weakness - or others, who are different from us. The life both inside us and in the world around us cannot be controlled yet we are not comfortable with letting go and allowing the flexibility and the insecurity that comes with constant change basic to all life.

To transform this culture of domination we must make friends with all that is inside us: our feelings, our loneliness, our deep wish for intimacy.

Violence happens when we feel disconnected from others, from nature, from ourselves; non-violence can happen as we facilitate real contact between people.

And real contact can be such a challenge!

We long for intimate friendship, for community, yet this longing to feel connection and be part of a larger, inclusive whole also brings up many childish fears. This sense of 'the other' creates fear of comparison and lack - am I good enough? too loud? too small? Do I like him/her; do they like me?

So we all create lives to keep people at a distance - by staying secure in our jobs, by feeling comfortable with the TV or computer, by using hierarchical structures of communication, by hiding in workaholic or alcoholic behaviour patterns or living in single apartments. We fear real contact with people because it brings us face to face with the unknown in ourselves. We can discuss ecology, finances, politics, make decisions and still we are hiding from each other. LIFE wants true community - to know others from within, to be visible and seen at the deepest level, yet this sort of contact can be disturbing and will definitely bring change and upheaval. It also brings a great gift: a person in true contact with others cannot hurt, lie, murder, rape.

FORUM wants to be part of this learning to be in real contact - with myself, my longings, my highest potential and my shadow, with other people, with nature, with life.

What comes to the surface when we begin working in Forum is not always nice. The suppressed and the hidden may emerge into the light of awareness. This can be done playfully, or it can be done seriously, and one way or the other, it helps to create deeper contact.

How it Works

The individuals making up a Forum sit in a circle. One person goes into the middle as though going onto a stage and the others form the audience. The presenter or 'actor' has the power and the space to speak and act without being interrupted by the others who initially play the role of observing spectators.

The presenter is coming with a need to communicate and learn, speaks or acts out his/her issues, revealing in words and actions his/her thoughts, feelings, values, opinions, emotions and judgements about a specific present situation. The other, the facilitator, focalises and guides the process by intervening from time to time in the actor's flow. In this way the actor and the facilitator stage together in the centre of the Forum a kind of extemporaneous play, while the group in the circle around them form the silent audience until the work is complete.

When the 'presenter' has finished, then others can step into the middle to give feedback and express what they perceived. Now the presenter can learn what others think about him/her and what they have to say which supplements, broadens and sharpens the personal issue he/she brought forward. The discovery of what others think and value about us, what perhaps keeps them from loving us, what meaning we have for them provides the essential social feedback.

After the feedback a new actor stands and ventures forth into the centre.

The role of the focaliser

Each Forum, usually lasting about 60 - 90 minutes, is guided by a facilitator plus a co-facilitator who remain members of the group but take on the temporary role of directing the Forum process. The facilitators are the only ones who can intervene in the presenter's process. They must have strong self awareness and be able to channel the energies, issues and processes of the FORUM. It is a role of service and can be 'played' in different ways: it can be a soft moderation which guides just by asking questions which may lead to the source of the issue; it

can be playful and artistic; it can be strict and directive - but all forms of facilitation are to serve the presenter who stays fully responsible the content and style of what is presented.

Facilitators are people who feel drawn to the role and who train and practise their skills. Forum facilitation is not neutral role because Forum supports what is authentic, alive and true, what comes into the light beyond politeness and the daily games of hiding and disguise. The ideal of Forum is to bring out the beauty of the person, revealing their highest potential. For example, if a person is stuck with a problem the facilitator listens to the facts but also helps the person to detach from them. The facilitator will not ask so much about why this is so but how the presenter can look at it from a higher perspective and learn from it.

Example: if one person envies a quality of another the facilitator may ask him/her to express that quality playfully, act as if she has it herself and try out whether there is a hidden quality in herself which wants to emerge – and lead her to embrace and strengthen it by acting it out.

The more knowledge one has about one's own habitual patterns of thinking and behaving the faster one can perceive them in others and intervene in a supportive way. The skilful facilitator possesses a broad human knowledge, a high social consciousness and a deep sense of responsibility. The facilitator who doesn't feel love and acceptance for the actor probably should resist intervening. While the facilitator does, to some extent, direct and shape the FORUM process he/she does not have the answer but rather remains in the role of a focaliser, asking questions to illuminate the issue, mirroring the actor in a way that allows exploration, reveals connections, and connects with the bigger picture. From there, solutions may happen as time elapses.

Aims and possibilities of the FORUM

The Forum does not primarily aim to solve issues. Rather it is about making the essence of the issue visible, about seeing what is. When we see the core essence of a person a feeling of love that transcends personal sympathy wells up in us. The ideal of the Forum is to bring out the beauty of the person, revealing their highest potential.

Often the Forum is also about sorting out the different factors and feelings that have an impact on the situation. The solution of an issue more often than not turns out to be a letting go. So first there is an understanding and then there is the releasing of an attachment. This letting go never happens by attacking the issue directly. It is more likely to occur by taking a playful detour which at first sometimes seems to lead away from the solution.

The Forum wants to lift the energy level, wants to trigger the life force and its expression. When the energy can be successfully raised a change of perspective on both the body and soul level happens. Sometimes this energy shift can be very simple, as when the facilitator invites the actor to move faster, or to exaggerate gestures, or to put a sound to the feeling. When the energy shifts, a new position may often be discovered from where the solution of the problem can develop. In this sense the Forum aims at a change in the moment, leading to liberation of the actor and the group.

We have become so used to hiding our feelings that we often lose touch with them. We laugh when we feel like crying, we reject those whom we desire the most, we say no where we feel

yes, and yes where we mean no. In the Forum we experiment with different sides of ourselves to find out how they feel when they are given permission to speak . So you might go to one corner and speak from one voice inside yourself, and then go and stand in another corner and speak from another, perhaps opposite, voice inside yourself. Theatrical suggestions can shift the energy sufficiently enough for a thought buried deep inside to be expressed.

Just by stepping into the Forum, inviting witnesses to your process, you begin to discover flexibility and ease in dealing with your own emotions. Through playing different roles and possibilities of behaviour, for example, one may discover that being angry with someone is just a surface emotion. At another level you may discover that the deeper wish you didn't dare to express is for a closer connection. As soon as one comes into contact with a deeper need and finds a way to express it and have it heard, the anger disappears.

Forum wants to lift the energy level, wants to trigger the life force and its expression. When the energy can be successfully raised a change of perspective on both the body and soul level happens. Sometimes this energy shift can be very simple, as when the facilitator invites the presenter to move faster, or to exaggerate gestures, or to put a sound to the feeling. Trying out different ways of behaving and theatrically acting out inner dialogues or emotional processes is a step toward dis-identification: I come to see that I am not this anger, I am not this fear, I am not this jealousy. The way I am thinking and reacting at the moment is actually only one possibility out of many. To lose identification with these passing states means that I have found an inner position of witnessing what is going on, of standing back from it. I have found my unchanging centre. In that place you find yourself no longer attached to the seemingly so important plans, needs, fears and calculations that are present in this particular moment and which will be replaced by a host of new ones in another moment. That insight allows an easier and more playful stance. From the witness position you do not project the experiences of the past into the future, you are no longer tied to the restrictions of the ego and your intelligence is freed to act. For example, when your partner or your lover makes plans that do not include you, and you react with fears of abandonment from the past, in that moment you are totally identified with this fear of loss. Then in the forum, as you express your worry and your sadness through some performance, that very expression brings you back to your own joy and humour of existence. You dis-identify from that fear and are able to see that behaviour of your lover or partner is simply his or her true path in the moment, and you can be the detached witness of it.

This kind of work leads us to our core, our inner truth, to expression freed from hiding and pretence. The stage that is the Forum is above all about truth - not truth as a moral category, but what shows up when we listen deep inside and allow ourselves to trust others, the truth that emerges when it no longer makes sense to maintain walls and wear masks.

Doubtless the path to social consciousness, compassion and contact requires an inner metamorphosis and Forum, because it is simultaneously personal and social, has the power to bring this about in us.

Where does the FORUM come from?

FORUM was developed by ZEGG-Community, an ecovillage in Germany. There it is one of the important ways to build community and new common values that are based on authentic communication.

It suits well with added tools like Co-Counseling, Non-Violent-Communication or Constellation Work.

The Forum evolved from a process of trial and error over more than two decades as a way to create essential transparency by embracing and cultivating the authenticity and diversity of its members. At the ZEGG community there are large Forums held periodically which the entire community attends; there are smaller Forums held by subgroups such as work departments, special interest groups, the youth; and there are also special training Forums for visitors and guests from other centres and communities.

Through the personal work of the individuals in Forum and the feedback they receive, the community comes to know itself, to discover its values, to reflect on its experiments, and to refine and evolve its vision.