

Clearing the enigma.

Or, The sphinx, a group and Aboriginal place.

Craig San Roque

This paper expands on points developed in the presentation at the Writers Centre, Sydney for the AAGP seminars on 23 February, 2008 chaired by Anne Noonan.

'It never departs from its own character; since it is always receiving all things ...by nature it is there as a matrix for everything, changed and diversified by the things that enter it'.

Timaeus - on Chora. Plato

'Space, then, is what must be there in the beginning, even before the act of creation occurs'

Edward Casey

1.

On the form of primal space - defined as *Chora* -as preexisting dreamthought/myththought in a group

No doubt many of you will have contemplated the interactive patterns of brain process and considered interactive firings in group process as a mirror of brain linking. In particular the associative linking and the inhibitory functioning in brain/neurological process.

The notion of group matrix, associational connectivity and specific functional regions in the brain as hypothetical elaboration of our brain processes as model of group behaviours can be approached and enhanced through an ecologically attuned philosophy of place. A useful beginning is found in Plato's *Timaeus* and the commentary taken up by Casey, recommended by Melbourne philosopher of place, Freya Mathews. Casey is very interesting on myths of originating matrix/ as a myth thought form which describes or explains the 'ground of being' and the 'ground of becoming'. For instance, an ancient Sumerian notion has the world being formed out of the matrix of a vast female being (Tiamat), later dismembered, her elements forming part of the created world. The ancient Hindu's have a similar notion in the dismemberment of a vast male form, Purusha. Plato in a less anthropomorphic mode concentrates upon the notion of '*Chora*' - This is a concept of a primal space as the precondition to creation - the necessary original space as the region from which all things can then emerge, develop and are ordered - once creation procedures begin. - In *Timaeus* this original condition is configured and translated as 'receptacle of becoming' or 'nurse of becoming' and may also have some metaphorical relations to the hand held winnowing basket used in primitive agricultural societies to sort seeds and grain from the husks.

These notions of primal or originary space gives some background to the notion familiar to group therapists, (derived from Foulkes), of an implicit 'ground of being' as felt and maintained in group process. A group may never really form if

there is no sense (or necessary illusion) shared in the group of there being a potential or actual *chora*, a 'ground of becoming' from which the group process can develop. As a group takes shape in fact and in mind we might note the presence of various 'grounds of being' forming in the assumptions of the group members.

I am interested in noting the presence or absence of *chora* as a 'basic assumption'. By this I mean noting the primal creation myths evoked or relied upon as implicit in the formation of any group, and perhaps diversely held by individual members. I am talking about the internally held sense of an original space out of which the group's members proceed and imagine. Put another way, from the *chora* the group creation and destruction cycles might emerge. If there is no sense of *chora* there may only be primal pre creative anxiety or pre destructive fear.

I have noted how assumptions about a preferred or culturally elected 'basic creation assumption' matrix or the *chora* operate within professional groups with which I am associated. It is not all that easy to get to the basic assumptions which are tenderly or tenaciously held in the winnowing basket of the core group of - for instance a Society of Jungian Analysts, a Psychoanalytic Society or an AAGP, perhaps, where members find themselves advocating for recognition of a *chora*/ground of being which is felt to be essential and felt to be internally ratified by each individual.

I am speaking about our personal senses, even if unconsciously held, of a primal matrix of being - and most especially the 'receptacles of becoming' which are, specifically configured as the 'training'.

This theme may seem abstruse as introduction but I am stating it as formative idea in the singular matter to place before us of - working with enigma in group activity.

2. Enigma

My offering derives its title from an obscure little book- '**Clearing the Enigmas**' - a commentary by Jung's erudite co worker, Marie von Franz, on an early (10thC – AD) - text by Muhammed ibn Umail - Hall ar Rumuz century) This is an Islamic text on alchemy - which takes as its task the 'clearing of enigmas' about the process and purpose of the alchemic (allegory) so favoured by Jung as a metaphor of transformations in human knowledge, in love, in consciousness, in truth and in therapy. The title and the theme presents us with the terms/ elements I need for this discussion on 'enigma' in group process; as well as in reflections upon my other task ; which is to apply oneself to the theme of working in indigenous Australian situations

My first reading into this illuminating and obscure text was in the Kulgera Roadhouse on the central Australian Stuart Hwy near the South Australian border with NT. I read more on successive nights in my camp on the outskirts of several Aboriginal communities where my task was to engage with and devise a 'best practice' methodology for community work with petrol sniffers. This task presented me with many riddles. Many enigmatic situations, much paradox. Many hidden

basic assumptions. Many contradictions in the *chora*, the ground of being and the creation myths of diverse cultures, the Anangu and the White people

I note that this AAGP seminar (Feb 2008) is taking place, little more than a week after the Prime Minister's apology to the 'stolen generations' - an event of national and community significance. I am assuming that most psychotherapists acknowledge the moment as being of cultural and psychological significance. It marks, perhaps, a move from a national 'paranoid /schizoid' and collective fixation. Perhaps dramatising the move towards a collectively acknowledged 'depressive position' or a 'stage of concern' (in Winnicott's terminology). This shift implies, as you know, an acceptance of the harm which I/we have brought to others during our phase of primitive narcissistic preoccupation, greedy anxiety and oblivious disregard of the consequences of our actions. In short, an undeveloped maturity might become unstuck. Perhaps an authentic emotional basis for non-illusioned reparation and the hard work of authentic relationship, will now get a fair go? We shall see.

In fact I am concerned in this talk with how we operate in a post paranoid -schizoid state in our professional groupings - which generally are social and emotional wellbeing professions - that is to say - pedlars of operative concern. It has interested me how rapidly professional care psychotherapy bodies polarise into a struggle with inclusion/ exclusion, ' good breast/ bad breast analysts' and fantasies of hierarchy, purity, and sado masochism (etc) when a training is getting up. I understand that the AAGP is not immune to this process.

Many of us here will have participated in hundreds if not thousands of groupings where there is a problematic matter to engage with.

Personally I am involved in groupings where the task is the psychological formation of analytic therapists, in university teaching in psychology with emphasis on experiential knowing- and also in working with people coherently and incoherently held in indigenous Australian activities, mostly in the law/ intoxication/mental health domain. In these indigenous situations, as Anne Noonan may verify, there is an unsettling of the settled procedures of therapeutic group work and a re-trial of psychotherapy itself.

Sitting here with you now in this old Rozelle hospital building I am thinking of memory, not only the collective memory here of psychiatric groups held in Rozelle and Callan Park but also my fifteen years of memory of an array of groups in Aboriginal settings, mostly held in Aboriginal spaces and locations and mostly concerned with passions, violence, substance misuse, family fights, failures of promise, intercultural mixtures, ceremonies, teaching events. These events/ groups took place in varied settings, from Federal Government air conditioned offices to sun blasted river beds, including late night story telling and diverse creative ventures of mixed intent, usually multi lingual, embodied actions and many events with enigmatic outcome. The configuration of these groups is worth noting. In particular I note the difference between groups held in western cultural precincts usually iconically identified by table and chair - as distinct from configurations held in indigenous spaces, usually configured by ground sitting, open or outdoor space and alignments of persons determined by gender, kin relations or status. The alignment pattern is interesting but is not the point of this talk.

Working in such regions immediately brings to attention the psychic facts of the differences between an indigenous *chora* (*grounding of being*) and the alternatives, that is to say the culturally configured assumptions held by persons whose birth place and nurture was in places other than in Aboriginal country territories. People like ourselves, perhaps, who are used to working in the *chora* of psychiatric institutions and consult rooms, might secretly believe that such places are the only legitimate settings configured for a therapy to occur. The ethnocentricity of such a basic assumption will also be clear to you.

What constitutes the *basic assumptions of a ground of being* is a matter of some interest to me, and is, I hope, of interest to yourselves. On many occasions in bush country multi racial settings I have wondered how conventional group process theory might help me keep track of my own anxieties, the intent of the group, the movements of the subconscious, an unstated archipelago of desires, the stated professional task purpose (and so forth).

Regardless of what the cultural difference might be, however, there are still the basic elements of humane psychoanalytic practice which are worth noting - I mean for instance the virtues of patience, the capacity to keep silent, attention, capacity for active listening, awareness of container. And so forth...

3

Enigma, tutelary spirit, primary space, emergence

However, let us now attend to the linking of four matters - enigma, tutelary spirit, *chora* as primary space. And 'transformative emergence' as a phenomenon.

Chora is conceptually related to the concept of *gnurra* or *pmere* (*pronounced muurah*) in central Australian language constructs. These terms indicate ideas and feelings about one's primal place, original locations.

(Note ; *Ngurra* as a concept is a part of a five fold conceptual framework used in teaching in central Australia to configure essential elements of an Aboriginal ontology. This is distilled in a masterly manner in the 2007 Bob Randall/ Melanie Hogan film *Kanyini* and also figures in the *Brain Story* used in petrol sniffing prevention.

The five elements are *Ngurra* (Place), *Walytja*(Kin relations), *Tkukurra* (cultural and personal story/ narrative, lore). *Kuranpa* (vitality spirit, identity) *Kanyini* (care holding connection) I am drawing on one element of these interlaced five but could conceivably elaborate all in terms of facilitating group process.

The *chora* idea leads to the notion of the potential of a group to become a potential space in Winnicott's sense - that is to say; (if you will forgive the over simplification) a place where first holding is fairly and evenly distributed , then receptive attentiveness is nurtured; then play, imagination and eventually cultural activities can occur . In those situations where play is impossible, where imagination is paralysed or perverted then therapy is needed.

With the link to Winnicott's formulations we can think of the group as a potential 'receptacle of becoming'. Things do 'become' in the space or they do not. Where they do not - then a mode of therapeutic attention is needed. How to bring an

effective therapeutic attention into a multicultural group which may be taking place in the indigenous *chora/ngurra*? Certainly not by fantasising that the group is taking place in an urban consulting room.

Beginning with this idea means that the facilitator might have to enter a state of bi focal or multi focal observant mindfulness, attentive to emergence of the elements which are needed to bring 'becoming' into play in a multi lingual *chora* - as it were.

What facilitates - becoming in truth - and - becoming in love - in such group?

I suggest to you that such a becoming can occur if enigma / tutelary spirit emergence and *chora* are taken seriously.

In von Franz and Mohammad ibn Umail's accounts of alchemic/ psychological/ spiritual individuation in the 'Clearing of Enigmas' there is reference to the (gentle) use one makes of the presence, in transformative operations, of a 'tutelary spirit' - The tutelary spirit, sometimes referred to in Sufism as *al Quidre* or the 'green one', emerges sometimes in personified form, sometimes in a dream, sometimes in animal metaphor, in dream statements, in events and sometimes in a 'still small voice'. One might simply say that the 'tutelary spirit' is the voice of one's intuition. This is acceptable when one thinks of singular intuition of one or two persons but the emergence of intuition in a group or a group mind is interesting. It places one, perhaps into the area of the school of fish, the flock of birds - where a group of similar beings moves instantly, as one, in response to a communally recognised signal.

On many occasions in the midst of groups of substance misused youth or their families, I have thought- 'well here are enigmas which could be cleared, and here indeed, I have need of a tutelary spirit.'

What has caught me at those times of patient perplexity is the notion of tracking the emergence of the tutelary spirit in conditions of difficulty in Aboriginal affairs. I have schooled myself against acting like a seagull after scraps, I have waited, as the older men tend to wait, as hunters wait. In most situations of difficulty there is usually an enigma, a riddle to be found or met, this is the emergent event, the signifier of an emergent preconscious thought perhaps or an implicit and actual desire which may be contrary to the stated task of the meeting. So often in such meetings I have seen the 'government official' bend the direction of the group's mind in order to hunt the government's desired outcome. What is left untouched are the dreaming thoughts of the Aboriginal group. This may be what Freud might have called 'the dream thought' of the grouping event. The dreaming thought may be the enigma waiting for attention. I have sat in other groups where the time needed was given, indigenous manipulators were given a say but not obeyed (mostly), passions were exchanged and (sometimes) a satisfying or creative resolution arrived.

The question of finding and working with the enigma in a group may appeal to you as useful. So too, may be attention to the emergence of a 'tutelary spirit' in the group.

4.

The sphinx above Thebes.

I have said that work in indigenous affairs is racked with contradictory circumstances, for everyone involved. Paradox, dilemma, enigma. Most working in Aboriginal affairs takes place in groups, in kinship relational matrices. One is really never alone and rarely a single operator. Nor is one's so called client a single operator. To configure an indigenous patient as a singular individual for treatment is an illusory act.

I am currently involved in 3 projects in central Australia and have come around to the simple (energy saving) practice of doing no more than seeking the prevailing enigma. If an enigmatic situation is found and formulated enough then I/we begin taking steps to make clarificatory moves. No more no less.

I enhance attentiveness to the implicit tutelary spirit. This is the practice of being alert to 'emerging' new patterns, new combinations, new crossings of neurone to neurone, new combinations of elements. New firings. Latent creativity.

Following Sophocles, I wait for the enigma as a way through to the solution of the problem. In Sophocle's Oedipus the problem which the citizens face is the degenerative 'plague' which racks the city. The abiding presence of the Sphinx at the entrance of the town harbouring a riddle leads progressively in dramatic moves toward the solution of the plague - or at least to the problem to which the plague is the presenting symptom. Alice Springs is a town like Thebes. Oedipus' Sphinx can still be a guiding metaphor for a western cultural person, a myththought by way of which one may come to a communal enigma.

Don't forget the Sphinx on Freud's desk, the central mythic metaphoric guide of analytic work turns around the enigmatic business of the Oedipal Sphinx. Bion, in 'Elements of Psychoanalysis' gives a decoding of the Oedipus myth in his own manner.

In Oedipus I take encouragement from the significance of the riddle chain as key points in the drama upon which much of the mystery of Oedipus and the movement of the story turns. The enigmatic signifier of the oracle, the enigmatic responses of Tiresias, the enigmatic reports of the witness to the murder, the enigmatic silence of the mother, the indication that a riddle would be the entrance to town, the sphinx is the enigmatic signifier that the Erinyes have a matter to bring to Thebes? What matters perhaps something wrapped in history back to Europa/ Cadmus and the serpent killed at the water source?

No action in this drama would have begun if there had not been a contentious settlement issue around a location. A colonial act by Phoenicians... perhaps.

So with all this going on why not - in group work - let the question become -

'What is the enigma - the riddle - emergent in this group event ?

Where is the riddle located.... in whom is the sphinx seated ?

Where is the Tiresias condition, (as indication of the tutelary or divining spirit) ?

Who recognises its appearance ?

Perhaps the tutelary moment comes, poorly dressed, enigmatic and probably rejected by the tyrant of the group governance.

5. Chora/ Ngurra

I have final point which still has to do with setting, Thebes is a **setting** - the drama of the city (the group) is determined by ideas of location of where we (Oedipus) comes from.

The significant factor for Oedipus riddle solving was that he believed he came from Corinth when in fact his home town was Thebes. Once the fact of the location of his origin was declared the rest of the story falls into place.

This issue of location where a person really comes from and from what family is absolutely significant in indigenous situations. Kin and place or origin is implicitly significant in black/ white interactions. I do not know how many times an enigma, a puzzle and a conflict in a group process has been cleared by attending to matters of place and therefore relationship.

I understand that some of the 'sickness' of group process revolves around enigmatic and un solved issues around location, place, and ablated or un recognised settings of oneself. We like to focus perhaps on the self (narcissistic self?) And ignore the setting location and therefore relational context of the persons. I have a feeling that this is very significant in therapy training groups where it is possible that the trainee subliminally perhaps is asked to set aside their origins in order to become the model of the therapist epitomised by a new coupling set of parent/ trainers who hold the 'truth' and a new sacred site. Zurich, Vienna, Paris, or whatever.

This issue is totally valid to raise in an Australia where issues of immigrant and indigenous displacement abound. No work in indigenous or immigrant problem solving can advance unless the matrix of place is totally absorbed and understood as to how place plays psychically in immigrant and in Aboriginal history, and thus upon the sensate and imaginal bodies and beings, thoughts, feelings. No transformations in truth or in love can occur properly if the significance of place is fudged. And because the significance of place is only partially recognised and this also contemptuously or ambivalently, then the enigma is thus. Aboriginal black/ white relations is an enigma of place. Failure in relations is linked to failure of appreciation of *chora* (as an image of a receptacle of becoming .) Thus in this country in every suburb and town we have agitations in the 'receptacle of becoming'- until kingdom come.

Please recognise that I am giving attention to the real or imagined and active location and not to the room setting of the meeting and how the chairs are placed. I mean here the feeling in the minds/ hearts of the people in the group about exactly where they belong, where they come from - what they are doing here and what imagery associations play in the background of the mental geography of the group . That is to say in the implicit *chora*. (I am indebted to this insight from participating in a group in this same room at the Writers Centre with Paolo Neri, who may not have known what I was catching from him at the time.)

6.

Conclusion.

I put to you then three factors, three elements which may play upon the mind of the group procedures in this country.

1. The matter of place is not the main issue necessarily but it is a preexisting condition. The naming of the *chora* or the invocation into the group of openness to a *receptacle of becoming* may be essential to allow a group process to take off. Even if naming the *chora* is felt as ambivalent or ambiguous, or is reacted to as undeclarable or troublesome, nevertheless the effort may be rewarded.

(Neil Murray's song 'Myall Creek' may give a taste of this in a very simple lyric manner)

2. The second is the task of finding and clearing enigmas, whatever they may be. Come what may. I think the focus on the enigma is an elegant and energy saving procedure which may be found to have value.

3. The third is attention to the elusive matter of the emergence of a 'tutelary spirit' - whose appearance deepens the drama, reveals truths, confronts tyrants and - in the end - may help resolve an enigma.

These three reference points, may give one a creative and enjoyable experience of working in groups even in the troubled terrain of inter racial intercultural groupings on the edges of desperation.

Craig San Roque . MAPS AAGP ANZSJA

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Essential references.

Casey. Edward S The Fate of Place A Philosophical History especially pp 32- 35
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Plato, Timaeus and Crito. especially section 16. Penguin Classics 1977.
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NOTE.

Included for interest is an extract from Leon Petchkovsky ANZSJA on 'Enigmatic signifiers' and 'Emergence' in brain studies. This introduces the idea of attentiveness to the associative networks and locations in the brain - as fact and as metaphor for associative linings and locations or regions of specificity. In group process we might look for factors of psychic regionalisation of themes, feelings, ideas, unconscious intentions. The notion of 'enigmatic signifiers' is useful as a guiding idea.

"**Emergence**" is a term that signifies how new and unexpected properties arise from the interactions of simpler entities. Thus the elements Hydrogen and Oxygen, have very different properties from H₂O, water. This useful "emergence" principle has been extended to the biosciences, the mathematics of artificial intelligence, and to contemporary philosophy. Marvin Minski (MINSKI 1986) extended it further to models of mind, and more recently still "emergence" has gained currency in the contemporary psychoanalytic discourse (CAMBRAY 2002).

But the psychoanalytic discourse is a "model of mind" with a concept of the **unconscious** at its heart.

Broadly speaking, we all emerge from an unconscious, in the widest senses of this term (not just the dynamically repressed). Some of this is, in principle, utterly irreclaimable. Who can claim an experiential awareness of the function of their spleen? Their COMT genes? Some of it, the pre-verbal, sub-linguistic, (the patterns, inherited and acquired, of the mid-brain, the hypothalamus, the hippocampi and the amygdala), profoundly affect experience and behaviour, but percolates to cortical awareness in very limited ways, only partially retrievable, and only poetically expressible at best.

There is a term in current psychoanalytic thinking that captures something of the way this subliminality unpacks in the therapeutic encounter. It is the term "**enigmatic signifiers**", coined by the psychoanalysts Frosh and Pontalis (FROSH 2005). It refers to the subliminal cues that are being thrown off all the time by both partners, often at variance with declared positions and intentions.

The psychoanalytic tango is a dance between the partners' **enigmatic signifiers**, and all of this patterning, conscious or not, decants into the therapeutic encounter.

Mostly, these patterns have a counterproductive fixity; the stereotypic projective driven-ness that Jung called the "complex". And mostly, the analytic dance itself is formulaic, those familiar transference/countertransference quadrilles that brought one to analysis in the first instance. However, just occasionally, something new, something "**emergent**", can arise. And whereas in the physical world, what emerges out of combinations of simpler elements is new **physical properties**, in the mental world, what (hopefully) emerges in the analytic encounter is new **meaning**. And new meaning can heal.

Petchkovsky in Proceedings of Conference on Subjectivity. Forthcoming 2008 ANZSJA ebook publication. Details available through San Roque roq@ozemail.com.au.