

'I have a collective nightmare...'

written in 1975 after East London Big Flame went to national Big Flame conference – followed by some thoughts from nearly 40 years later

'Now I feel all jingle jangle; I felt calm before. Now I feel argued with, not feminist enough, wrong.

Now I feel when I get back to London I'll have to organise a whole new round of meetings, raising all kinds of new questions as women, and new responsibilities, just at a time when I wanted to ease off all round, to feel the load of relating to Big Flame nationally was at least spread over twelve people.

Also I want to rethink the whole crazy logic of meeting after meeting every night – no time to read or talk, no space to look about and make a choice, and all the while arguing and struggling for people in the world to take more control over their lives.

I have a nightmare. It is the kitchen table of our collective house – covered with washing up, jars of peanut butter, honey, jam, crumbs and letters, leaflets, dirty everything. The board is full of messages, unread, and lost important keys falling off. The vegetable rack is toppling over. The cats have just pissed on the floor & there are cardboard boxes everywhere.

The sitting room needs clearing. Little B wanting love and the other kids are downstairs or expected, screaming, ratty, wanting this & that (not me), demanding, impossible to play with. The phone is ringing – messages about meetings, work to be done. Broken sleep mornings, kids to school, people freaked out. Cased up in my corridor of a room, plywood wall shaking, wondering how long I can hold out against the barrage of demands, how long I dare sit selfishly reading a few things or writing a letter or doing something unaccountable that no-one else knows about, that hasn't been agreed upon by everyone.

All around me my relationships storm: Why didn't C come to say hello? Is D angry about the stairs? Why haven't I had time to talk to E? Where's F when I want him? I bet G has disappeared again with some other woman, perhaps this time for good.

Before me is the prospect of a meeting – who will turn up? Will it go well? What will I say? If no-one speaks, how can I raise the things I want to know? Or if it is a meeting of just us, just our group, how can I express myself without angering people or being put down?

Meanwhile any moment I have of free time is at someone else's expense, at least that's how I feel. The edges are blurred, unclear... How much time and responsibility do I put into kids who mainly want someone else's time and who someone else takes all the main responsible decisions for...?

Everything is so messy...

In my room a pile of literature – things I should know, things I should read... It grows bigger every day. I never start it. I can't keep up with my reading, or my relationships. Never enough time to talk to H, or the other H. Never enough time to be around with the kids & let it grow. And all the anger under the surface: people feeling hard done by – "She never...", "He never..." Remarks that come out indirectly, behind people's backs. Tension. False jollity. Jokes that aren't funny but are a mask for aggro...

How glad I was that little B was at the Big Flame conference, her openness. Four years old, but she was the only person I could talk to in the lunch hour, the only person I could show my need to be with someone, a breath of sanity. And when she came into the huge full room, the huge full empty room, the dreaded plenary, she stood in the middle and said, "I don't like this meeting", picking up the hostile vibes, the silence, the tension in those rows of faces.

Saying the one thing that everybody thought but no-one dared to say.'

Nearly forty years later....

I found the above passage scrawled in an old journal from 1975. Recently I showed it to a friend who had not been involved in such shenanigans in the 70s. After he finished reading he looked at me and said 'It didn't work, did it?'. I suppose that wasn't surprising, but I was shocked. So pervasive is our culture's ignorance and inexperience of collective projects that the assumption about any such venture is that it 'won't work'. So I realized I needed to say more, or else my rant would be taken as a definitive statement.

What I wrote does give the impression that living collectively and being in a political group was a form of torture, and sometimes it was. But I remember too that it wasn't always like this. The fact is, I could have written an equally vitriolic diatribe about a bad day in any living situation I have been in before or since then. Yes, there were what I experienced as boring, guilt-ridden meetings; yes, housekeeping could be chaotic; yes, there was the thorny forest of human feelings that proliferate when a dozen people live closely together. Collective living and activism and youth did throw up specific challenges. But that was only part of the picture.

Imagine a family where you're not thrown together by genetic accident but because you've chosen each other. Where you share certain ideas and values. Where you've made a commitment to support each other, help each other with childcare, share cooking, tackle the shadows of childhood difficulties, launch into the world with various creative projects. Imagine the close bonding, the trust, the sense of belonging that develops. How you grow to love each other's children. How you learn to co-exist with each other's foibles. How you wake up every morning feeling part of something worthwhile. Those were the things I took for granted when I wrote that piece above, the molten core of wellbeing underlying my explosion of frustration.

Just imagine. When you're ill, someone brings you supper in bed. If you squat a house, someone helps you paint it or put in the plumbing. If you get arrested unjustly (it only happened to one of us), others harass the police station till you are released. Certain pictures stay in my mind. A love rival cradling me in her arms

while I cried with the pain of a migraine. Long, long conversations about everything from love to prices to social conditioning to the Holocaust. I remember soaring. I remember dancing. Magical drug-filled moments of playing and laughing in the group. Singing old pop songs. Eating as a gang. Yelling together on demonstrations.

It was like having your childhood all over again and receiving the care and support that allows you to grow up on your own terms. Like all childhoods, it was utterly formative and life-shaping: the values of that group have stayed with me ever since. Like children, we were uncontained and messy; sometimes we squabbled and picked on one another. But we were also our own parents and sorted things out as fairly as we could. Despite our interest in therapy, we were not self-obsessed and we managed to reach out boldly into the world. We did get an enormous amount done in terms of organizing and publishing; overall as a collective we managed to be a thoughtful and benign force; we drew on a huge well of goodwill; and we learnt to trust the goodness in each other.

The pain and pressure made more impact in the moment, but like the pangs of childbirth they fade over time and as you look at the fruits of your labour you don't regret a thing. The fruits in this case are a sense of collectivity and belonging that stayed with me since then, a commitment to ideals that haven't left me, an ability to be honest about difficult things, and the joy of still being friends with some of the finest people I have been honoured to know. Friendships forged in fire, not always easy, but they reassure me about what is possible in life.

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