

A SYNOPSIS OF FREE SPACE

I wish I could be like a bird in the sky  
How sweet it would be if I learned how to fly  
I'd soar through the trees and look down on below  
And I'd sing 'cause I'd know  
How it feels to be free!

Have you ever wanted just a place to be--in your entirety--with no fear of rejection, but rather acceptance, understanding, real listening, and real comfort? A space where you could go, to grow and discover with a free spirit? A women's group in San Francisco called "Sudsofloppen" did. After six months of being together and delving into their minds for a way, they came up with one workable process for actualizing free space so it could be and become.

FREE SPACE is a four-fold, ongoing process of opening up, sharing, analyzing, and abstracting. The ability to open up relies on a deep trust in others and the relinquishing of defensive fears and barriers. This can be viewed as the beginning of a re-socialization process. We live in a world of competition and alienation. To rid oneself of these, to attain a level of self-acceptance (a state of mind whereby one can freely express), is the first step of rejecting a lonely and dehumanizing existence. This can lead to a sense of community in which sharing can occur. Sharing involves understanding another woman's self-expression within the context of herself and responding to it according to her needs--be they for support, interpretation, or constructive criticism. This response should further the trust needed for individual opening up and also serve as the mainstay for the processes of analyzing and abstracting. Objectifying shared experiences and realizing the elements which are common enables the group to construct a framework or picture of society and the ways of its givens. Analyzing these elements and abstracting them can also take the direction of constructing a new society. The four-fold process is an attempt to allow individual actualization, rather than depersonalized conformity.

To facilitate this method within the group, it has been suggested that the four steps be applied to selected topics such as marriage, child care, the philosophy of the women's movement, etc. Several groups adopting the FREE SPACE technique could meet periodically to discuss their responses to topics and subsequently form action groups or build a network of communication within the larger movement.

Sudsofloppen, when presenting this model, was aware of the problems and difficulties in achieving it. The formula does not attain itself overnight. It is conceivable that a group might spend months trying to relate meaningfully. The San Francisco women also experienced difficulty in not allowing the group to become a refuge. They wanted a free space or a takeoff point for

carrying its principles into their daily lives. They wanted to maintain a level of emotional involvement and at the same time develop their intellectual and analytical capacities. It should, furthermore, be noted that these four aspects are not necessarily chronologically ordered steps.

Some women in Bloomington have found this model to be an effective means of activating support. Regardless of whether the group follows this plan or not, the essential factor in an effective group is a deep commitment and a constant re-evaluation of where the group is and is going.