

# The large group as a transformational space

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the process of a large group – from my experience as both a participant and conductor; and using my artwork as a way to facilitate my understanding. I attempt to articulate what is implicit to large groups and is difficult for the individually-focused mind to comprehend. I have approached my paper from the inside out. I have thought about the process of the large group from inside of me: what I sense, feel, and experience in a large group. Then, through images that I have made and through Māori mythology, I have explored some ways of attempting to make sense, to understand and make meaning.

Large groups can be a means to better understand and learn to engage in the conscious and unconscious processes that affect us and control us all in large group settings. Inside the large group many or all of the elements of an organisation, or even a culture, already exist that offer us the potential means to begin to engage in more of the whole picture of human life. Large groups can help us to think about interdisciplinary issues, bi-cultural and multicultural issues, political issues, power issues, and all areas where splitting occurs in connection with difference. It is also possible to experience in the large group space a transformation of separate individual consciousness, into a feeling of belonging and community where people can dialogue across their differences.

## **Introduction**

He awahi tētahi i tētahi                            To find a place in our hearts for each other,  
Me noho tahi, tēnā pea ka tika    Let us sit together, and then we will find a way  
  through.

I aspire to embrace (awhi) others with all my heart without losing my self. I believe that large groups can be helpful; they take us beyond family and the familiar, towards the social and the cultural life of our existence. My hope is that we can meet together with both our differences and our similarities in a creative and productive way. In the traditional Māori culture, members of an iwi meet on the marae in hui where ‘sitting together’ is the customary way to discuss issues, work out differences, and find new directions. In the culture I grew up in there was no such space. The transformational space I seek draws on the blending of large groups based on the group-analytic frame, the talking circle I learned in heart politics and the hui.

The other core theme throughout this essay is the capacity to not know. W.B. Yeats said it best:

God guard me from the thoughts  
Men think in the mind alone  
He who sings the lasting song  
Thinks in the marrowbone.

Here, Yeats addresses a common problem, one that W. R. Bion (1961a, 1962) wrote about when he talked of 'K' and '-K'. This essay explores some of the experience of being in a large group from my experience as both a participant and conductor; and from using my artwork as a way to facilitate my understanding. I attempt to articulate what is implicit to the large groups and is difficult for the individually focused mind to comprehend. Maori Marsden talks from the Māori world view about Te Korekore, the world of potential being, Te Pō, the world of becoming and Te Ao Mārama, the realm of being. It is through a cyclical creative process that new life arises. From a different cultural perspective, Daniel Stern says that we prefer the perspective of the bright light of midday but it is in the hazy mist of the landscape at dawn that newness occurs (Stern, 2005). I take this to mean that it is when things are not clear, not understood but more in the realm of potential that change or growth is possible. The potential of the large group is to take us beyond the known familiar to new experience that is centred in the essence of who we are, our marrowbone.

Large groups can be excruciating. As the group forms, the space between the people shifts: it begins as a collection of individuals with different desires and needs, and becomes a group with which each individual may or not may not identify. Some group members feel silenced. Others feel compelled to speak. Some are unable to find their voice. There are also those who refuse to participate. And then there are those who do find their voice and find the experience expansive and illuminating. Each person brings to the group their history, stemming from school, church, community, cultural, and family settings. These histories then form a lens, which shapes and limits the ways the new group can be seen.

Why then, you might ask, should we bother to have a large group? Large groups can be a means to better understand and learn to engage in the conscious and unconscious processes that affect us and control us all in large group settings. Inside the large group many or all of the elements of an organisation, or even a culture, already exist, offering us the potential means to begin to engage in more of the whole picture of human life. Large groups can help us to think about interdisciplinary issues, bi-cultural and multicultural issues, political issues, power issues, and all areas where splitting occurs in connection with difference. It is also possible to experience in the large group space a transformation of separate individual consciousness, into a feeling of belonging and community where people can dialogue across their differences.

## The creation story

I have approached this essay from the inside out. I have thought about the process of the large group from inside of me: what I sense, feel, and experience in a large group. Then through images that I have made and through Māori mythology, I have explored some ways of attempting to make sense, to understand and make meaning. The Māori creation story, through the vibration of sound, resonates inside of me with something ineffable that connects to what I carry in relation to large group experiences. Listening to the creation story being spoken helped me to find what Symington (1983, p. 283) calls ‘an act of inner freedom’ and in this way find the space for thinking. I found myself moved and excited by listening to the creation story as spoken and written by Ranginui Walker (1990):

Te Kore	The void, nothing, potential
Te Kore-te-whiwhia	the void in which nothing is possessed
Te Kore-te-rawea	the void in which nothing is felt
Te Kore-i-ai	the void with nothing in union
Te Kore-te-wiwia	the space without boundaries
Na Te Kore Te Po	from the void the night
Te Po-nui	the great night
Te Po-roa	the long night
Te Po-uriuri	the deep night
Te Po-kerekere	The intense night
Te Po-tiwhatiwha	The dark night
Te Po-te-kitea	The night in which nothing is seen
Te Po-tangotango	The intensely dark night
Te Po-whawha	The night of feeling
Te Po-namunamu-ki-taiao	the night of seeking the passage to the world
Te Po-tahuri-atu	the night of restless turning
Te Po-tahuri-mai-ki-taiao	the night of turning towards the revealed world
Ki te Whai-ao	to the glimmer of dawn
Ki te Ao- Marama	to the bright light of day
Tihei mauri-ora	there is life

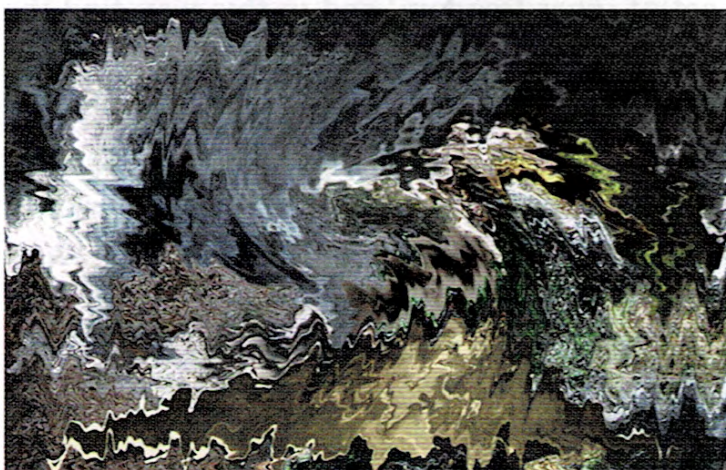
In the Māori worldview, the concept of creation has three components. The first is Te Kore. Patricia Grace (1984, p. 16), says in *Wahine Toa*:

Te Kore could neither be felt nor sensed. This was the void, the silence, where there was no movement and none to move, no sound and none to hear, no shape and none to see.

It is impossible to conceive of the part of creation that Te Kore represents. The



human mind reaches for meaning, shape, patterns, and the familiar. Consciousness is not a feature of Te Kore. Marsden's words (1992, p. 134) helped me to make sense of Te Kore, a concept central to the Māori worldview. He says that while 'Kore' means 'not, negative, nothing' and is absolute, to say 'korekore' then transmutes the negative into the positive, without abandoning the negative and thus encompasses both. Potential for life, creativity, and newness marks the beginning; the hope of life, there is always something, some essence, and an inchoate energy that is a precursor of all phenomena. In my understanding this is the source of life, and of our humanity.



Te Pō is more tangible than Te Kore. Out of the nothing comes the beginning of something. The beginning of gestation is Te Pō. Something begins to exist without form or direction. It is possibility. It connects to a part of humanity that can be new, that can find new possibilities. My experience in this place happens out of consciousness, out of rational mind and out of

contact with what is known. Te Pō begins structures, the world of becoming. Te Pō is the seeding of life. Te Pō is born out of Te Kore, and Papatuanuku (the earth) is born out of Te Pō. Te Pō is the journey from darkness to the glimmering of light; it is the beginning of life, of existence. The process is arduous. It is endless; there is no sense of time or of a beginning or an end and yet it subtly changes. Something is happening.

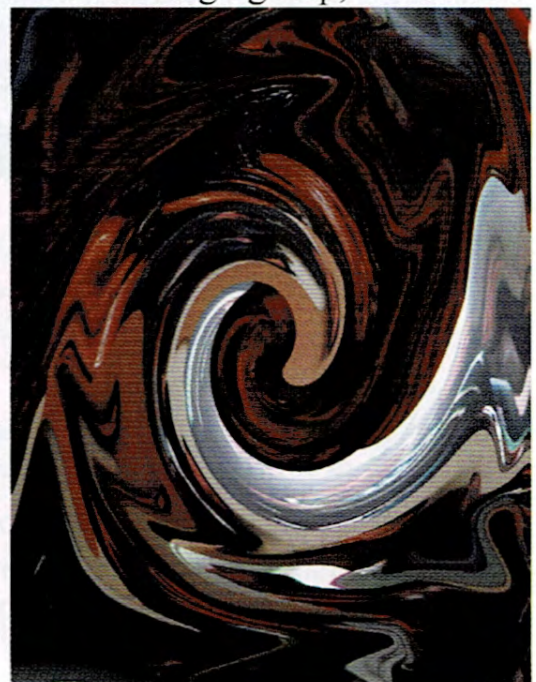
Large groups can feel like this. I find I need to surrender into the experience where the sense of oneself and what is known is lost or threatened, where one feels as if the meaning has been stripped away. Then gradually one's own sense of self can be reasserted. Letting go is essential. The idea of letting go reminds me of a favourite paper written by Emmanuel Ghent in 1990 called 'Masochism, submission, surrender'. The core assertion of his paper is that we all long for surrender—to let go and to be known and recognised. Ghent defines surrender as 'convey (ing) a quality of liberation and expansion of the self as a corollary to the letting down of defensive barriers' (p. 213). Paradoxically though, the movement toward surrender brings with it dread: dread of emptiness, of pain, of loss, or of the unknown. This is a corollary to what Bion meant when he talked about 'K' and learning from experience. Daring to experience the unknown requires a quality of surrender and brings dread and loneliness. If we are willing to surrender to the process and find ways of voicing our experience, large groups offer the possibility of a greater awareness of life beyond the bounds of our own culture and family bindings.

## Group-analysis

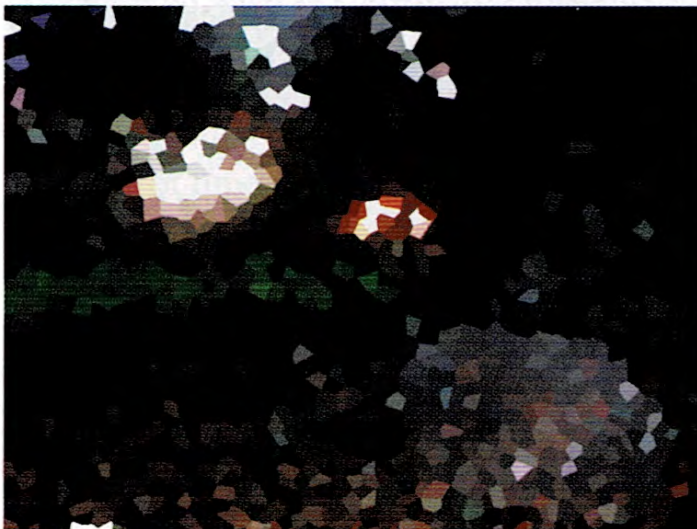
In the discipline of group-analysis, the history of thinking about large groups has arisen out of the work of psychiatry in World War Two, which out of necessity focused on therapeutic community rehabilitation (Schneider & Weinberg, 2003). Important early thinkers include W.R. Bion (1961b), S. H. Foulkes (1957, 1990), Main (1975), de Maré (1975), de Maré, Piper, & Thompson (1991), and Kreeger (1975). De Maré says in his 1975 paper, 'To apply small-group or psychoanalytic models to the large group is like trying to play ludo on a chess board' (p. 146). Large groups incorporate the contextual in its totality; all the variations present in the group in terms of role, culture, gender, race, religion, age, and so on are part of the group process. So for example in Jerusalem in 2000 (the International Association of Group Psychotherapy congress), I participated in a large group of over 200 in which there was a dialogue between Israelis and Arabs; and where we re-enacted the Berlin wall, exploring its many meanings for people from east and west of the wall and the implications for those of the rest of the participants. Historical tensions between Jewish and German people were also aired. As de Maré (op cit.) reminds us, large groups are complex and many-layered.

As the group numbers increase the dynamics change. Schneider and Weinberg (2003) suggest that a large group is more than 30 to 35 people. On the other hand, Volkan (2001) talks about the large group in terms of nations: ethnic, political, social, or cultural groupings. The size of the group makes a huge difference to the functioning of the group. Factors such as whether everyone can be seen and heard by everyone else make a difference to how one feels in the group. In a large group one can not expect to see and know everyone. For example last year I went to Norway for the Tri-annual Symposium of the Group-analytic Society. Four hundred and fifty delegates gathered in Molde on the northwest coast, nestled in the Norwegian fjords. The last event of each day for four days of the conference was the large group, which was described in the programme as:

a tradition that offers participants a safe and contained context in which to explore the interface between the individual psyche and the social sphere. The daily large group sessions will bring together all participants, and through the free-floating associative discussion they are given the chance to explore the connection between individual feelings and ideas, and link to the social unconscious in relation to the societal context in the here and now. (Island, 2005 p. 8)



We sat in a series of circles, with aisles dividing the circles at regular intervals. The room had no windows and a very high ceiling. I felt as if I was in a cavern filled with a sea of people. The seating was on one level and the circle in the middle was very small. At first, most people could not see or hear what was going on around them. While English was the language of the conference, there were many cultures present. What we shared from the beginning was a willingness to sit in this crazy-making space together and attempt to 'communicate. It was hard to tell exactly where the solitary female conductor was. Interesting though how clear it was when she spoke that she was the conductor. Amazing how much is communicated through tone, timbre and volume of the voice. The experience was confusing. The topics seemed to shift from one person to the next. Nobody seemed to be listening to what was said. However, over the four days of the group the energy changed. There were some heated exchanges about race and nationality. The discordant and disconnected sense from the first day became more coherent and relational. It became easier to understand and follow what was being said. It was as though we settled into being together and started to make use of the group to think together. I got a sense of how the large group in Molde was part of a larger process of different cultures beginning to listen to each other and find our own voices without discounting the less articulate. Also I was aware that the large group within the group-analytic conference has been meeting for many years. It carries a history, a whakapapa, and a culture of its own that will continue.



The protocol for large groups in the group-analytic tradition often starts with silence. While the setting may have been very carefully prepared (e.g., Teresa von Sommaruga Howard—also an architect—carefully spaces each chair in a perfect circle before the group arrives), there is no warming of the space through taking turns with introductions or in some way avoiding the awkwardness

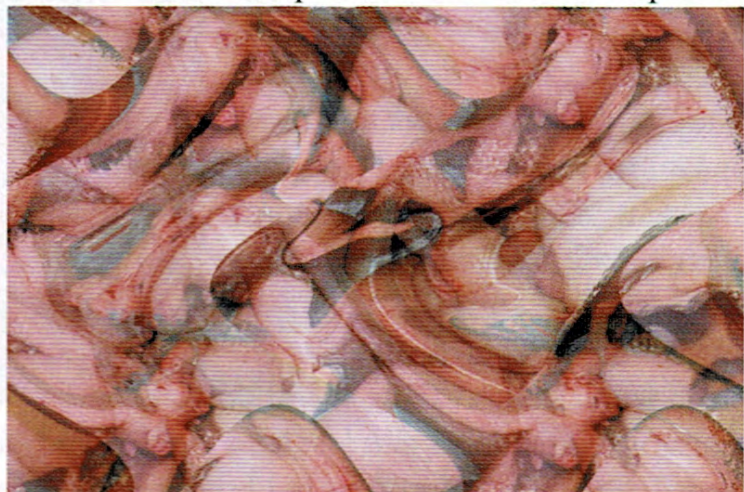
of beginning with how we are now. People are expected to attend, to stay in their seat throughout the session, to speak, participating in a free floating discussion (de Maré, Piper, & Thompson, 1991) and to be silent when others speak. De Maré et al (op.cit.) assert that the group has no set task, although they also write passionately about the need for the group to learn to dialogue. To dialogue takes practice; it is something to be learned like a language and is a process of speaking that engages a sharing of thoughts and feelings back and forth across the space, and from different perspectives so that they may be held together. The injunction is to use words to find a way to speak into the group. De Maré et al (1991) describe the process as reflecting the matrix, which can be defined as the common shared ground created within the

boundary of the group experience, and from which the meaning and significance of all events are determined. The matrix is the source of verbal and non-verbal communications. I associate immediately to that series of movies called *The Matrix*, where the matrix was an underlying structure that controlled everything and yet was outside of individual awareness. It is that unconscious underlying structure which we could call culture, that can begin to be noticed, and in the work of the large group then begins to be somewhat known.

De Maré differentiates between the small and large group as between feeling and thinking. Theorists such as Kreeger (1975) and Weinberg (2003) also say that being in the large group increases the likelihood that people will revert to more primitive anxieties. This is particularly true at the beginning of a large group where group members are more inclined to defend against the experience by becoming more paranoid and schizoid. I think this happens more powerfully and more unconsciously when the large group style is new to people, when there is no implicit knowing of the process. However, paranoid-schizoid processes occur in all groups. Also, in the process of surrendering, to some extent we lose our minds and so may revert to a paranoid-schizoid state of being. Another way of saying this would be that we see things in a more black and white way when we regress. When the large group is working well, thinking enters another domain, that of dialogue. I believe that feeling still occurs, but maybe less of the splitting and divisive or overwhelming type of feeling that leaves no space for thoughts.

### **Large group themes**

Three themes—‘transposition’, ‘not understanding’, and ‘belonging’—have been present for me as a group conductor and participant in the large group. Transposition is the repetition of patterns that occurs when we transpose to the large group as a whole unit, our past experience of large groups and sometimes family experiences that have been in some way difficult for us. The most common are school and church. The ‘not understanding’ is about the individual in the group. Large groups incorporate more than an individual can take in. Individuals attempt to hold onto their separate identities, their individuality, and they cannot. The large group represents the organisation, the culture and society and will reflect that which is happening in the world beyond the individual and thus makes it hard for a person to understand the experience that they are having. De Maré (1975) comments that the large group, in the most part, does not attend to the needs of the individual. The focus is on our social being (Sirota, 2005).



### *Not understanding*

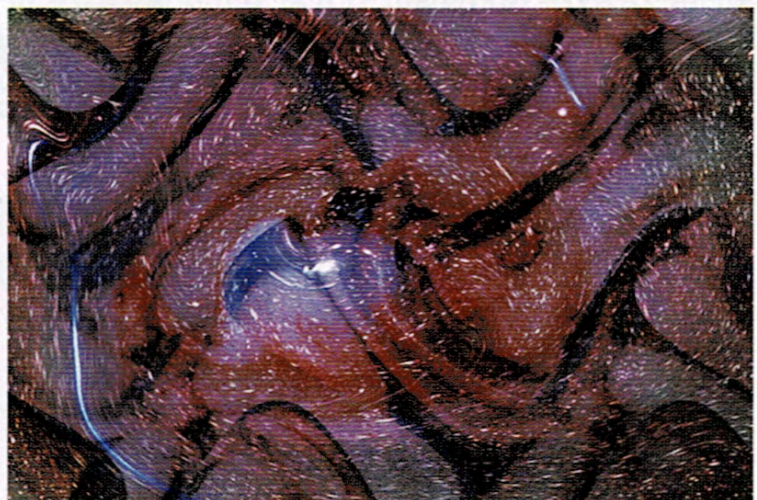
Some of the problem with this tension between the individual and the group arises from the traditional philosophy of psychotherapy that reflects the Caucasian tradition of the individual as primary (Stacey, 2003). Sociological theory (and the Māori world view) focuses on the social as primary:

This is a way of thinking in which both mind and society are the patterning activities of human bodies. For actions, there can be no inside or outside and so mind comes to be thought of as forming social interactions while being formed by them at the same time (Stacey, 2003, p. 2).

Group-analysis has evolved in part from this tradition, which has its roots in the work of social interactionists such as G. H. Mead. The individual grows out of the group, not the other way round. Individuation takes a lifetime and incorporates the evolution of awareness to include the developing of a self in relation to the group. In the large group we are in a sense at once more isolated than in any other place and at the same time we totally lose our sense of personal identity. These things happen simultaneously. In a large group we tend to either abandon ourselves and follow the group or abandon the group to hold on to our identity. Large groups impel us to reflect on our identity because they bring us up against our implicit cultural knowledge.

After a large group event, a colleague talked about sitting in the outer circle (there were 200 people in the group) and feeling her outer backbone. I commented that she was describing something about the struggle between staying with oneself and being a part of the group. She replied that she missed something by not immersing herself in the group. It is also possible to think about this as being in exile, an essential part of strengthening ourselves in relation to the group. This is what is meant by individuation. At the same time one has to contend with the group's responses to one's separateness.

In this same group, somebody was sharing their hating of the group: 'it's like soup with these chopping up blades underneath mushing everything together' (March 2004 NZAP National Conference). Group members then started to reflect on the different kinds of soup they felt they were in, and their identity.



Some liked hunks of carrots. I said I preferred salad because each piece was discrete and living. I was also thinking how I don't enjoy soup when I cannot tell what the



ingredients are. My mother used to use leftovers from the fridge with foods I did not like. On reflection I was able to recognise my unwillingness to surrender at that moment in the group. I was feeling critical of some group members; I didn't want to belong with them! And yet as the group progressed that did change for me and for others. We began to trust in the group, in the process and in us. I felt as if the self that I found in the group expanded me, was more than before. We can also reflect on what people meant by the soup with chopping up blades. It is evocative, and I think is a wonderful description of the struggle for identity that the large group engenders.

Related to the struggle between the individual and the group is the process of recognising and understanding that each individual has their own interpretation of reality in any moment in the group. Our perceptions of the same events are different and, in a large group, finding a way to meet while accepting these differences can be a slow and painstaking process. This connects back to surrender and letting go our familiar ways of perceiving the world.

### *Belonging*

The urge to belong is a basic impulse for humanity. As the number of participants in a group increases, unconscious processes become more dominant (Seel, 2001), and it becomes more difficult to establish a sense of belonging. There are so many other possible realities with which to contend! People find ways, often habitually and non-reflectively, by splitting, projecting or introjecting, to manage this discomfort. Splitting occurs when people take opposing positions, such as being too emotional, or too intellectual; some feel wrong, others righteous, some withdraw, and stuckness in the group ensues. The usual outcome of stuck divisiveness is that people disengage from the group. This increases their isolation and reinforces the experience that large groups are impossible.

For over two years now I have been co-conducting with Russell Waetford of Nga Puhī, a median-large group at AUT on a weekly basis. The group is called the Community Kōrero and it is a blend of a hui and a large group. We meet in the whānau room called "Te Tuinga" which suggests binding together in a new way. The participants are students from the adult and child psychotherapy training at AUT.

How to find a way to stay with oneself and join the group? In the Community Kōrero somebody apologetically owned their racism and felt that one of the ways that it surfaced was through competition. This makes sense when we think about the position of different ethnic groups. Who has supremacy over whom? For New Zealanders this brings to mind the Treaty of Waitangi which has been interpreted differently by Māori and Pakeha in terms of sovereignty (Orange, 2004). My response to this student was that idealisation is also racism and I owned it as a problem that I have faced. As a New Zealander born in New Zealand, it has taken many years for me to begin to value the bi-cultural nature of Aotearoa. Māori culture seemed to offer so much more.

In the Community Kōrero last year, one of the central themes related to belonging was between the child psychotherapy students and the adult psychotherapy students. The child students were angry because of their invisibility. Their difference was not recognised or understood by the adult students who assumed that they belonged to the same culture. In fact they do not. There are some core differences in the way the programmes are structured and in the culture of teaching and learning. It took some time for the adult students to take in this different culture. As the difference became clear, the blame came towards the leaders: ‘You should change the structure. Why have you put us through this?’ What was the hardest to achieve was to sit together with this difficulty, with the feeling of the lack of fit. It was a parallel to the issue of bi-culturalism. Somebody had to be wrong. Students often resorted to institutional blame. It is hard to sit ‘with’ and ‘in’ these differences. Yet paradoxically, when we listen to each other, then something can change—not the situation, but the feeling inside of the group.

### *Transposition*

In the group I co-conducted in Molde last year, we established from the 1<sup>st</sup> session that it was an open group; that people could come for one day or for all four days. By the fourth day when new people came, there was a huge disruption in the group. The existing group members wanted to get on with the work they had begun together. The new group members wanted to find out what was happening and to find a way to belong. One of the new



group members turned on the conductors saying, ‘Why did you let us come in? It would have better if you had made it a closed group. That is what we usually do in group-analysis.’ The feelings were intolerable to her. She represented a newcomer (immigrant) who was part of an established and strong culture who expected to belong and expected the group to follow her own culture; however, it did not. The existing group members were eventually able to reflect on their process and likened their experience to how it might feel for a people in a country when a new wave of immigrants arrived, disrupting the focus and pattern of the culture of the indigenous people, not understanding their culture and treading on their sensitivities.

New group members were struggling to belong. The group divided into subgroups—those who had been there longer and knew the culture and those who were new. We were able to begin to think about this as another wave of immigration and how difficult it is to recognise the otherness of the other. In the group’s fantasy, we were New Zealand. This came particularly from a woman who had struggled on the first

day with the Māori words in my paper. Early in the second session she said how much hatred she had felt towards my strangeness. It was hard to understand me with my odd accent, and it didn't matter anyway because I lived across the other side of the world. She wasn't going to come back since it felt too hard, but then she realised that she was being racist and felt it was important that she come back and explore the meanings for herself and she did so. The background story was that this woman was Danish and currently lived in Norway. She didn't always feel as if she belonged or that her difference was accepted. In some way she was transposing her experience from where she lived onto me. So on the fourth day when the new wave of immigrants arrived, the group had to work hard to accept the new and allow the group to change to accommodate their difference, while respecting the ongoing process that was already happening in the group.

## Conclusion

Central to my thinking in this paper is the concept of learning from experience (Bion, 1962). I am talking about experience that goes beyond the implicit, to Te Kore, and Te Pō, to the potential that is inside us for building meanings that relate to and contain our own and others' culture. Learning from experience requires us to be able to bear being in the place that has been called 'not knowing' long enough for our authentic self to emerge and develop.

In the process of writing this paper, I created my own art, inspired by the rich and vibrant Māori chant, as a way of exploring my own not knowing, to find understanding that is based in the experience of my senses. The vignettes illuminate the themes of 'transposition', 'not understanding', and 'belonging', and the necessary struggle and the growth that can occur in large groups. Large groups are not psychotherapy, but they can expand our awareness in helpful ways. However it takes willingness on our part to surrender some of our precious hold over our own known world so we can embrace other ways of being more fully.

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