

Category I - My Tryst with Process Work

A RENDEZVOUS WITH ME

By

Mehroo Kotval

Process Work Professional for 25+ years

E-mail: mkotval@gmail.com

A RENDEZVOUS WITH ME

Every individual has her / his history and no matter how similar each story, each individual deals with it in her/his own way. So, what I have gained and grown with Process Work (PW) is my talk for the day.

It is termed a rendez-vous because no matter how low I have been Aastha and process friends have always put back the romance of life in life.

I akin PW to a buffet spread where the layout is the same for every attending participant. Each of us selects what we want and relish, discard or chew over certain things which are unpalatable or unfamiliar. We assimilate as per our own personal chemistry. Similarly, the output is quite different for each of us. That is also the reality of process work.

From possessing and yearning for Knowledge to self-learning and realising what, where and how I need to evolve was my debuting prom - from certainty of outward stimulation to experiences of inward learnings. Having the faith that I can rely on and draw upon my own wisdom was a revelation. This does not mean that Process Work (PW) is a ra-ra situation where I am always heard and feted. The perspectives, the hard hitting mirror shown, complemented with the gentle holding led me to stability and has seen me through troughs and dales.

Hope this helps in explaining PW – which is personal, elusive and experiential.

I table my encounter with PW before you. I see it from two vantage points on either side of the bench – what it has meant to me and what I have learnt from being the server or observer of those around me.

My involvement of over 25+ years of defining or explaining and being explained PW has been rather tough. Comprehending it through the mind seems elusive. As one narrates to the other, what it is and what it did to me, I can hear the recipient either thinking – may be true for her, will it be true for me? Or the listener blocking the ra-ra extolling of what happened and how I overcame something etc. It seems OTT - over the top – to the other.

By using my personal shifts, I shall explain what PW means to me. I am not defining PW per se. I will mostly use examples from my own life space.

THE MENU

The learning forum, called lab in PW, is similar to a sumptuous buffet spread out before each of us. The PW offering and the buffet menu is identical for all the invitees. Each individual chooses what is to be accepted and / or rejected in both instances. The delights, the disappointments are similarly personal and cannot have an explanation for another. In the buffet - with which we are familiar and in the lab setting, the menu of emotions is plated as per the need of the group present. The offering is alike.

However, each participant imbibes what each one *wants* to imbibe. Just as each of us plates what we relish; we discard what we don't like and cannot stomach. Sometimes a dish is known. Sometimes it is not. In the lab setting, the dish or emotion that is not known

becomes more relevant at times. For this 'unknown dish', each of us has a choice - I may take it on board and experiment or have a closed mind to what it may do to me. As we take pleasure in imbibing and assimilating what we are familiar with and what we think is "good for us," we are also shunning the unknown, the not palatable, the unacceptable because of a prejudice we already have. My mind says I hate spinach. So it is also stating I am not going to try spinach quiche as I will not like it. I shall not experiment. I shall stick to the tried and tested. No risk - No change.

Similarly, my prejudice of taking risk may not allow me to experiment in the lab. The known is safer and comfortable. Hence, the process of selecting what I should assimilate in itself is subjective. What I will think over, what I'll mull over or what I'll discard is each individual's prerogative.

As each lab differs in its components of participants and or facilitators, the sharing and the inputs differ as well. There is never a replica of any lab. Similarly no buffet is the same. There may be similar dishes but nothing is identical. There are no xerox copies, no duplicates. No repeat experiences. Each group puts on rails what they are dealing with at that point of time. What is live and current for them. Pretty much like locally grown vegetables of the season.

The prejudiced selection

Let us carry this simile farther - I may love prawns but dread eating them outside except in a trusted home, for fear of falling sick. There is a preconceived notion that I operate from to begin with. In PW terms, I may experience fear when for example, a family confrontation is happening before me because, I fear confrontation itself. Just as I avoid serving myself prawns, I'll avoid that confrontation. If I am adept at giving and making excuses, I may make it seem like that prawns will not suit me. Or in process terms that I do not want to meddle in

the confrontation before me. The truth is, it is the easier way out to avoid a stressful situation. Change becomes more of an anathema.

My inability to confront is indeed true of me. Especially the old meaning I had of it which was being combative, reactive, forceful, aggressive – in short, the usual behaviour which is termed ‘confrontational’. But it is in course of labs that I realised that confronting means not repelling or shouting down, silencing the other but stating my position, which is in opposition to the other’s stance and block being aggressed upon or aggressing on the other. In fact, anything which is not good for my wellbeing and inter-relatedness is not healthy confrontation.

Wellbeing above all

From the PW table, I have imbibed certain things which have aided my wellbeing. They have helped me simplify living and relatedness. This got highlighted to me in the construct we often use in Aastha. We call it the Triangle of Wellbeing, a most potent construct for me. When thought, feeling and action are in sync, a state of wellbeing occurs for each of us. As in each triangle, there are three planes between which we operate. The axis of thought-feeling is the classic Hamletian dilemma. I think deeply and strong emotions surface from it, paralyzing me from acting. I yoyo between thought and feeling.

Operating on the axis of feeling-action is the one which ruins many a relationship. I get angry and say things I regret, or slap or hit the other. A display of emotion on which I act. This impulsiveness often breaks a friendship built over years, in a second. I have not put thought to my feeling and act impetuously.

The third axis of action-thought often makes for acting without compassion and humaneness. The moment a thought comes to me I act upon it. It may make one hard-hearted and even ruthless. Dictators are made from this quotient.

When I put all three – Thought-Feeling-Action – into my behaviour it results in my own wellness and that of the other.

Let me give an example from my own life - I always knew I must confront a close family member for putting me down. I am angry at his put-downs. I get sleepless nights at perceived and real put-downs. But I parade between thinking and feeling. This was my state for decades. Then I got courage to operate on the third dimension of action. So, my routine behaviour was that I'd clamp up and say nothing or get reactive, but his behaviour and my reaction continued, making me feel agitated and upset. I was looking for a change not just a band aid solution.

Many years after being in PW I opted to step out of this double bind of thought-feeling, wanting to do something. I *had* to do something about this. I realised action was missing in the whole interaction. At first, I did not know how to act. After chats with my sisters and others I knew the only way was to talk to him, clearly stating my feeling of being put down. My biggest fear of confrontation was confronting him. I knew I'd overcome my fear of confronting when I could confront him. So, one fine day I wrote down what I wanted to tell him. Drafted it. Redrafted it. Re-read it. I even rehearsed it with a friend sitting opposite. Then on an occasion when he called and started hectoring as was his wont, I whipped out that paper and read what I had written in as equitable a tone as I could. There was silence at the other end. I know I had become an adult that day. I was able to put my thoughts with all the harboured emotions I had carried with me without them reflecting in my voice and ultimately put it in action by placing it before him. After this episode, my ability to confront has become easier and proactive. There is always work to be done but I neither shy away from it nor duck it. I don't suffer from indigestion. I see what is palatable to me.

This Triangle has often allowed me to step back and see which of the three coordinates is missing and think what to do to add it. As I use The Triangle often, I have learnt that sometimes the obvious missing coordinate is not really the missing one.

Redefining tapes in my head

We all have tapes playing in our heads – the same thoughts, sometimes the same feelings. So many familial, social and cultural taboos remain unquestioned. They keep being whisked inside us. Some are followed on auto mode as that is what is in my environment. Do this, don't do that. Say this, don't say that. A daughter should be like abc..., a sister must do xyz... Don't argue with elders, a zillion messages imbibed without processing them.

Again, through the years I have learnt that redefining these tapes makes me an adult. Playing with them like dough, you can create different shapes and meanings. We have all been fed on some words and terms to which we have given water tight meanings. With personal experiences you realise that the definition that was sacrosanct as a child has been spiced up or watered down, leading to redefining. For me some of these tapes which played in my head and were never examined are specially three words - Truth, Judgment, Misogyny. They had a negative / positive tonality in my head.

Truth:

So if I were to get to what the word truth meant it was in my book of virtues. Always be truthful. Truth above all. A lot of these homilies which are like moral science sermons.

One day I went to see a friend's mother who did not know she suffered from Cancer. The family did not want her to know as they thought the fight would be out of her and she would feel defeated. As we were chatting, she suddenly asked me if she had cancer. She knew I was the 'truthful', candid one amongst her daughter's friends. Without missing a beat, I responded with "Not that I know, Mrs A." To date I think I was truthful. A different take on

truth from the definition I inherited. I had redefined truth – it is not always sticking to the fact. In this instance, I was truthful to my friend, I was truthful to the situation, I was truthful to the moment.

Judgment: I have battled being termed judgmental. One of the biggest wars I fought. Through all my Phases towards becoming a professional, it dogged me and plenty afterwards as well. What got me into a frenzy was the label itself. It was used so often for me that I felt people saw me only as one attribute, one characteristic. I was at times unable to function if the ‘J’ word was used and felt I was singled out for this label. That label stuck with indelible glue. As I was in the battle, I did not, I could not see why I was so labelled. Something dawned on me which was my learning. Firstly, I articulated what I thought and felt, without a pause, without seeing the other’s point of view and point of reference. The fact of not “listening” to the other made it seem that I had concluded an opinion without giving it enough weightage. Then, the slowest learning for me was that in my desire to be “fair” to all I had to take up for people, situations and circumstances. Fairness is so closely linked to judgment in my reality that I failed to see that justice is adherence to rules of conduct. Fairness is the individuals’ moral evaluation of this conduct. When I want to be fair, I start to sort out things and issues. The moment I “sort out” something, I put a right-wrong, a do-don’t-do, a way which may not be the path of the other.

I’d like to share my realignment of the definition of the word judgment. Despite the hard battle fought, suspending judgment altogether is not something I would advocate even today. I see now that it gives discretion, the ability to decipher and clarify binary issues and polar stances. I know I don’t like wishy-washy stances. Judgment maintains a standard, it helps me to take a stand. Some judgment is needed to continue being discerning, selective and discriminating..

Misogyny: And now to the third attribute I referred to above - Misogyny. I am a part of a ladies' group which explores feminine leadership, called Avani. After a certain amount of cohesion of the group, we were dealing with accepting our own misogyny. I had no doubt that that word did not belong to me at all. After all I was a feminist. After my denial but persistence from the facilitators, I saw the opacity of my feminist lens.

Some misogynist prejudices I rethought and indeed accepted that I was operating from. Without articulation from the environment, one picks up social norms and I had not kneaded these into rethinking. Some of these positions are absorbed almost like the process of osmosis! They are insidious. E.g. From routine interactions I had picked up that women are the keepers of societal norms. We were the upholders of social and cultural rules. There were certain restrictive behaviours that were inculcated in the girls of our family. Eg. We were not allowed to go out unaccompanied till our teens. We could not go to some restaurants that my brother went to. There was less freedom of passage for my sisters and I than for our brother and that was okay. It was not questioned. Similarly, freedom of body, language and inner thoughts was not garnished in the woman kingdom. You could not sit anyhow. You could not use expletives. You should not say what you think of situations and people. There was a definite difference in these.

Then there were other misogynist social constructs I had neither redefined nor revisited - e.g. wives should be shorter, younger, less educated, not ambitious, earn less than the husband. Just think, if ever there is a transfer in the professional field, who gives up their job 99% of the time?

However, gender differences were not maintained in our family in terms of professional choices, in that the girls and boys had the same options. Or doing house work. Brother made his own breakfast, in fact we did not! I had taken these stances for granted. After all, it is important to keep the social balance... and whose responsibility is that? You

know the answer. It was with a lot of reluctance that I admitted that I too had misogynist paradigms which I needed to re-examine and redefine.

The lens I have today, I did not have 15 – 20 years ago. This is true for all three paradigms – Truth, Judgment and Misogyny. Regarding my battle with judgment, I found that my name Mehroo is derived from the Zoroastrian archangel Meher which presides over justice, truth and promise. I seem to live out my name saga.

Through the course of my life, these three attributes - truth, judgment and misogyny were not seen as needing definition. They simply were how life was lived. PW changed that, among several other things.

Establishing Boundaries

One of the most nutritious thoughts I have had from PW is the concept of Boundaries. Again, in Avani a fulsome discussion helped me to understand boundaries. I can create a boundary i.e. put a healthy demarcation with people at my will. With my fear of assertion and conflict, it is heartening to know that today I can place a boundary and manage it differently with the same person at different times on different occasions. E.g. We have a close-knit group of eight persons from school. One of our other classmates found out and has been desperately wanting to know what happens in it – almost like we were running a free mason lodge. Since I formed the group, I was quite informative with her till all the other seven felt that her interrogation was not okay. She'd turn up for lunch, unannounced with her family members, although she had not been in close touch for some forty years. So I started closing in on the boundary and am no longer expansive. The boundary wall is made of more concrete material than it used to be. No more a boundary of feathers for her to tread in and out.

Formerly, my thinking was that a boundary once made was unchangeable. If the wall was of steel, it remained so. I believed the only way to change that stance was to carve out

an aperture for easy flow of communicating. From believing that boundaries were like barriers to knowing I could change its material from feathers to brick to steel gave me responsibility of containing or expanding relationships.

This was most apparent when a close relationship of 17 years came to a standstill. At first I was devastated, then I was puzzled. I felt let down, pained, angry, sorry for myself – a gamut of emotions which were surely not helping me to bloom. I could not even purge them out for quite some time. From a perfunctory boundary I had to rework the quality of material I needed to place a healthy distance. It was then that I realised that I had to convert these dysfunctional emotions which I would have termed “negative” before, into workable feelings for my own well-being. I got back dignity and self-care.

Learning from others

Sometimes, in the lab space I see in another participant, things I am not willing to see in myself. I was brought up with a sense of understanding, consideration towards the other’s life space and issues but I did not realise that my exposure to different people was very limited as per my limited life experiences. Coming from a metro town, the true impact of rural settings, their limited perspective and how it shapes the personality took me a special awakening to hone this realisation. In labs, the exponential growth of people from the vernacular medium or restricted resource availability has never ceased to amaze me. High achievers in corporate life who have learnt writing by scribbling in the sand or on the backs of cattle they were minding. This compassion and sensitivity has only flowered and helped me become tuned to the differences, the fabulous struggle some have had and seem to wear so lightly on their sleeve to achieve what they have.

I value independence and it is an important ingredient of my personality. In a lab space I feel indigestion when I see decisions made for a co-traveller by their parents, or the karta in

their joint family or an authority figure in their lives. E.g. Running labs for students of a premier management institute, I realised that most of the participants were pursuing a management course, not because it was their choice but some authority figure told them that's what they should be doing either because they got good grades or they would bring pride to the family. A lot of them admit that their personal choice would have been something quite different. All their lives they will probably rue their choice (or actually the lack of their assertion). Each will cope but their brilliance may never shine. There is no doubt they will be competent in different measure but they may not shine in their brilliance. Competence is my ability to do something well as determined by a pre-determined yardstick. Brilliance is my flair, my skill, my innate strength. Several of these graduates may never know their brilliance but they will have competence, undoubtedly.

IMBIBING INDIGESTION

Each of us comes with our own history, our own story and no matter how similar each story, each deals with it distinctively as no two persons have the identical paradigms. It is akin to the digestive process. Digestion is quite different for each individual. I imbibe, I reject, I assimilate as per my very own chemical reaction. No two persons at the table will benefit from or reject the same nutrients.

Sometimes I do not know I am harbouring a reaction. I get indigestion, reflux, acidity or issues another does not. The accepting of food is distinctive to me. Similarly, in a lab space I will assimilate only that which I can handle, which I can mull over and make something of it for myself. Getting to my judgment issue – it has given me physical symptoms of heart-burn, sleeplessness, indigestion, tiredness and sometimes even throw-ups.

I saw the what-is-good-for-me menu quite early in my PW journey and became conscious of what nurtured me. The difficulty was, with what did *not* nurture me. It is

heartening to realise that lab space graces all situations, all experiences and all conditions. That is the lack of boundary we mistake for no rules and regulations. Because one's misdemeanours are graced, does not mean that there is a freedom to demean another or not follow the laws of humanness.

It's a nice-feel to be accepted, to be praised, to have unconditional acceptance where there appear to be no restrictions. Quite heady. This misperception of anything and everything will do took some time to thaw. It appeared to me that there are no boundaries but the reality of it also makes one realise that no boundary at all is not an option in any sphere of life.

The PW learning is not linear like a college degree. The patience and tolerance shown for my being judgmental through all three phases made me a bit confused. What was expected from Phase I to II and from II to III? I expected a progression, as you would have a change in job profile in a corporate context. And I was still battling the same issue of being judgmental. This led me to have little clarity what the different inputs were between one Phase and another. It all seemed a khichri – though the experience was far from bland. Further, I may mention that as change takes place I was not in the slightest aware of the process of change. It is after one has traversed a bit of the way that you start seeing the change. Start acknowledging that dessert will soon be served!

Changes in the Menu offered

As life gets more and more complex, the buffet offering tends to please not only the majority but also the niche participant. One acknowledges the diabetic, the Jain, the Vegan. Similarly, we sometimes tweak pure PW to make the work less intense and in-depth and try to crash as much in, in lesser time to fill the belly. The week-long lab is now a five-day experience. It may also be the need of the hour. Participants and their sponsored industries cannot (or will

not) spare their resources for a week - especially when the participant cannot concretely specify what s/he has received from the lab. The reporting of the five days' experience is far too adrift for concrete comprehension and cannot be quantified. Similarly, in our Facebook world of only putting forth my best foot forward, people are not conscious of the flowering that can occur with in-depth work which can be unpleasant.

So to cater to a large community, we also expand the basket of goods with multi cuisine at various stations. I am not sure this is healthy and are we going away from group perspectives being offered or are we bordering on therapy? But let's not get into that controversy. It's too wide and too in depth an issue for this occasion. But it is worth a debate before the system gets anaemic.

As I state this, I am surprised at my own words as I have always gone through life with my head, understanding things and wanting explanations. This has changed considerably for me. In fact, premium on knowledge, approaching the world through the head was ingrained in me – socially, culturally and in my family. From thirst for knowledge to self - learning and realising what, where and how I may see the world was my preview to the menu. The lack of instruction in labs and only resting on group and personal experiences was becoming tiresome for me. When constructs were explained I came alive and loved the backtracking from suddenly understanding what had been happening in the lab to how unfolding of the self was happening.

CONCLUSION

Believe in Make in India

I did not define PW at the outset. Today Google is omnipotent. You will find erudite definitions of PW. But the distinguisher between those quoted definitions on Google, which

are primarily from the Western Hemisphere and our experience is that Aastha works with participants through an Indian perspective.

What do I see as the main difference? We have an Indian lens and look at context in our milieu, with Indian mythology, Indian social structure and Indian identity. Stories and tales narrated are from Indian literature. We use the Panchatantra, Akbar-Birbal tales, the jataka etc.

Further the facilitator's role is holistic s/he is guru among shishyas – e.g. in an open lab where I was facilitator, one of the participants was battling fear of death in his life context. There were two opposing perspectives – some facilitators felt that since the fear of death was only one person's concern, it was inappropriate to deal with it. There were others who thought that the fear of this participant was real and since he had brought it up, it should be addressed. In Aastha we would look at all blocks that stop one from functioning effectively even if just one participant had brought up an issue during the lab discussion.

A third difference I see is that the model of equalising is used in Aastha – in the sense that facilitators share their data and vulnerability as much as does the participant. It humanizes the process and it levels all the members in that group. It does not have an up-down approach or facilitator tells and participants listen. There is true peerage with the facilitator keeping authority without wielding it. As we get more confident about ourselves as Indians, we acknowledge an Indian angle which seems to differ somewhat from the Western one, especially in Aastha.

The fourth difference I applaud is the setting up of a second line of functioning. A lot of PW consultants talk of succession planning but when it comes to our own institutions it is not actually done. Aastha operated with a Board of Trustees. In their wisdom the BoT created a second line of command called the Governing Council. When the GC has issues

with the BoT, these were debated in a not-so-contentious BoT-GC meet, to iron out what was felt. It gives a cohesion to the groups and a robust, living boundary.

The cherry on the top

Let's refer to our buffet simile the last time. The process of digesting what we have imbibed, whether in the banquet hall during the buffet or what churns within us, during the lab have lots of similarity. We have selected our menu and it is time to consolidate, to digest what we have understood of the happenings around us.

As I continue to grow as a person and maximise the nutrients I have absorbed from a lab space, I get aware of why I do something. Not all persons have this advantage. Neither the buffet offering nor the lab process is stagnant. They change from forum to forum as per issues, characteristic of the group and what is catered. Only thing is that you cannot change the menu of the buffet at the last moment... BUT you can have instant course correction in a lab situation. It is hugely dynamic and organic. In fact a major difference is that the menu in the buffet is pre-determined while the menu in PW emerges from the collective present.

To sum up I'd like to say that PW has given me the ability to be server and the served – to see things from either side of the table, without compromising on values of life and the enchantment of living a full life. It has given me the love to appreciate a well decorated dish, a song, a drawing, a complex thought in simple words, a playing child, a grieving human, a split-second victory. I laugh. I cry. I am now silent.