

Robben Island Diversity Experience - My Personal Observation

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THE ROBBIN ISLAND DIVERSITY EXPERIENCE - MY PERSONAL OBSERVATION

When I reflect back on the experience, I realized that there were three different groups of people leaving Robin Island on the last day of the experience. In this discussion I will share my view on the three groups as I experience it.

Satisfied/Enlightened/ Changed (AHA group).

I believe this was the largest group of people leaving the Island. It is difficult to allocate a percentage to this group, but when I listen to, and observe the people during breaks and the social events it was clear to me that this was the majority of people.

This was the persons who were the "fighters", fighting against the system and in the system (large group, small groups, intergroup, review and application groups) and fighting with them self. They were people who at a certain stage during the experience realized, that anger and hate for something or someone, are destructive for them self, for the people around them, and for the system/s they belong to. These people were willing to look at their disfunctionalities, admit it, share it with other individuals or in the groups, and work on it. They make a personal commitment to change their dysfunctional behaviour.

Although the processes that lead to this experience was sometimes very painful and emotional for them, it was also a life changing experience. I believe it was for some individuals like finally breaking the chains of the past and set them self free from that "thing", that prevent them from being fully human beings with healthy relationships. It was people who were originally looking for the answer on outside and by doing so sometimes blame other people and the system for their issues. During the experience they realized that the key to their freedom is inside themselves, by setting themselves free and the people who hurt them in the past. This realization happened suddenly or was part of a continuously awareness during the experience.

The key characteristic of this group for me was the willingness to learn from the reflections of the consultants, from the group and from them self. Another characteristic was the ability to accept responsibility for their own emotions and actions and to adapt/change accordingly. They were testing their own boundaries and perceptions about people different from them and by doing so, allow new experiences in their self-concept. They were also exploring the relevancy of their own believes and culture in relation to other people These people left the Island with a new self-concept and outlook on life.

The Middle Group (The Frustration Group)

It is difficult for me to find an appropriate name for this group. To label this group as the "unaffected group" or the group that leave the island the same as the day they arrived there, or the group who learn nothing, would be unfair. I believe this group carry a huge

load on behalf of the rest of the people and plenty were dumped on them, especially in terms of the emotion "frustration".

These people were leaving the Island still confused, realizing that something happen, but not knowing what. I believe the dominant emotion that they experience was that of frustration, sometimes feeling uncomfortable but not knowing why. It can be that were not ready to look inside them self at issues that prevent them from learning and growing. Their focus was more on the outside, on people (e.g. the consultants) that were part the experience that irritates them or the administration (e.g. accommodation, transport etc). It can also be that there were other issues outside the Island that make it difficult for them to focus on the event for e.g. problems at work or personal problems. They were normally the quiet and not so outspoken people and pretend to be in control of them self, by not expressing their feelings and sometimes afraid of doing so.

Another reason for their frustration or unwillingness to learn can be, that before they arrived at the island, they have their own expectations or fantasies about the experience and the island. One of the expectations could be that someone would take responsibility for their learning and that they expect a formal classroom setting. The reality of the experience, did not met this fantasies or expectations and they decided to withdrawn or play it safe, by keeping a low profile.

The difference for me between this group and the first group discussed, lies in the fact that it was difficult for people of this group to determine if they learn something negative or positive or if they learn something at all, where for the first the group the outcomes of the experience was positive.

The Injured Group (The Pain Group)

According to my observation this was the smallest group and consist out of very few people, maybe eight? They learn, but the learning for these people was negative and they left the Island as hurt people without answers or solutions to their problems/issues. These people work very hard during the experience, especially on an emotional level and carry a lot of pain and anger on behalf of the rest of the group.

I assume that these people come to the experience with the expectation to find answers to existing issues/problems, mostly on a personal and relationship level, using the rest of the group or individuals in the group as vehicles to find the answers. The group, especially the large group, were not willing to deal with these issues or were very hostile towards these persons. Instead of finding answers for their personal issues or problems they were hurt in the process. It can also be that the experience open old wounds or pain (unfinished business) and that the individual were not able to deal with it.

I think one reason why this group left the island with pain and hurt, was because it were difficult for them to liberate themselves and the individuals/system who inflict the pain or hurt, and in the process to acquire peace from within.

Conclusion

The focus of this discussion were on the three different groups that I observe out of my personal frame of reference (paradigm). I was part of the experience so it is difficult for me to be totally objective. I believe a more closely observation from an outsider and interviews with the participants during and after the experience would reveal more groups. What I realized, you can no go untouched through the experience, on a personal level it open up a new world of experiences for me. When I examine the three groups I realized that during the experience I was part of all three of them, but I think I spend most of the time in the "enlightened" group. I left the Island as a person with a

different/new self-concept; full of hope for the people of South Africa and for the friends I met from other parts of the world.

ROBBIN ISLAND EXPERIENCE - REPRESENTIVITY AND CONTAINMENT

While I was doing some processing I ask myself, what did I represent for the group or for certain individuals in the group. The other question that I ask, related to the first one, what did I contain for the group or for certain individuals in the group. Let me explain.

Representivity

I believe each one of us represent something or someone for other people. When we come together for the Robin Island experience we bring that something or someone with us to the group and the island. I bring with me to the group "white Afrikaans speaking male" (someone or group) and "member of the police service" (something or organization). It can be that I represent much more to certain people, without even knowing it. Your past experience or perception about what I represent for you will determine your behaviour towards me. For instance, if you are a woman and have an abusive relationship with a white Afrikaans speaking male, then you can either try to avoid me, or dump your anger on me, or use me to test your perceptions or experience about white Afrikaner males. Another example, If you were in the past detained or tortured by the police, than I represent that organization for you, even if I am not a functional policeman or were not involved in what happen. You can either be angry at what I represent, avoid me, or use me to explore your anger or perceptions. It is even possible that I could represent "apartheid" for some individuals.

Containment

If I am aware that I represent something or someone for you, then how must I act? I then become a container for you to use, to explore your emotions and perceptions about that something or someone. If I feel you accused me or attacked me and I take it personally, than I can either defend what I represent for you, or avoid you and withdraw. These actions have negative consequences, people can be emotionally hurt in the process and it can lead to more negative perceptions. It can also lead to conflict, not that conflict is bad, it is what you do with the conflict and what do you learn out of the conflict that matters. If people succeed to work through the conflict, than better understanding and sound relationships are build, it also leads to a change in perceptions.

What is the correct manner of behaviour as a container, so that the person or group who uses you, as well as you, can learn from the experience? For me the most important thing is to remember that it is not about me as an individual, but about what I represent for the other person or group. As already mentioned, if I make it personal than I can be emotionally hurt or have a feeling of guilt about what I represent, for the other person or group. It also important to give the thing/s that you contain for the other person or group back to them, so that they have the opportunity to look at it and learn from it. You can reflect it back by saying something like "About what you telling me, it seems to me that your experience with white Afrikaner males were negative and you are still angry at us" Normally the person will respond, and this will lead to further discussion and exploration and to a deeper level of understanding. Never try to defend what you represent for the other person, the key for me is to really listen and try to understand the other person or group. For me this was were I really experience and learn diversity.

During the experience I also "use" individuals and the group as containers to test and change my perceptions about what they represent for me. Most of the times they were

not even aware that I use them and sometimes I was not even aware that I use them as containers or was used as a container. Thanks for everyone who allows me to use them as a container and who uses me as a container. Although sometimes uncomfortable and stressful, it was a great learning experience !!

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