

# Nude Encounter

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Paul Bindrim is a clinical psychologist who believes that the most agonizing feelings through which human beings must suffer result from the conflict between the need to say "Love me, and let me love," and the need to retain a personal identity.

Nineteen strangers, Bindrim among them, gathered in a small paneled room at the Center for the Whole Person and enacted the kind of human drama upon which Paul Bindrim bases that conclusion.

Among them are a psychiatrist, two high school teachers, two elementary school teachers, a nurse, an artist, a political scientist, a college professor, a former Catholic priest, a social worker, a school principal, a personnel director, a traveling salesman, and a reporter. There are seven women and eleven men.

They are there to take part in a marathon, 20-hour group therapy "encounter," during which they will spend most of their time together naked, both physically and emotionally. They are tense and apprehensive as they arrive one by one, fully clothed. They walk warily into the room, and take seats on the floor against a wall.

Bindrim, 48, who will conduct the session, is a licensed clinical psychologist in practice in Hollywood, Cal., for over 20 years. He is regarded as the prime innovator in the development of nude group therapy and nude sensitivity training. Bindrim conducted his first nude session in June of 1967, and since then has led scores of sessions involving hundreds of people all over the country.

Psychologists and psychiatrists all over the country have followed Bindrim's lead and are now conducting similar nude therapy sessions. Among them are Dr. William Swartley and several associates at the Center for the Whole Person.

Bindrim concluded early in his work that nudity "facilitates group interaction in a marathon." Nude groups, he says, seem to integrate and become therapeutically functional more quickly than clothed groups.

Nudity may be essential, he feels, "to compensate for the sensory isolation experienced by people in their normal clothing." Nudity has been particularly effective he says, in work with "self-defeaters" who fail because of negative self images that grow out of real or imagined bodily defects.

The session March 14 through 15 in Philadelphia began with "intellectual introduction." Each person is given three minutes—timed with a little hour glass—to tell who he is, and why he is here.

"You get just three minutes," Bindrim told the group. "That's all it's worth."

Some have come out of curiosity. Some say they feel ashamed of their bodies. Some have been in analysis for years, or are veterans of numerous "clothed" encounters. Others have had previous experience with nude encounters. For some, verbal and self-confident, the three minutes are hardly enough. For some, frightened and uncertain, the three minutes are endless, and others fill in the time for them by asking them questions. The exercise breaks the ice, and some of the tension leaves the room.

The next thing they will do, Bindrim says, is "get acquainted the way animals do." He calls the process "Eye-balling." That means sitting, face to face on the floor, staring into the eyes of a partner without speaking until some physical reaction seems natural. Each person in the room is to "eyeball" with every other person before the exercise is over. The reactions are as varied as the hangups of the participants. Some rub each other's shoulders.

Others scratch each other. Some embrace. Some push each other violently away. And some become involved in tense, earnest wrestling matches that tumble them across the floor and into other people. Impressions are formed that will have repercussions sometimes hours later, as repressed hostilities burst free under the pressure of intense emotion.

The eyeballing goes on for hours, and then we again gather in a circle on the floor to discuss our anxieties about nudity. The recreation director, a pretty girl of 24 with a worried face, says she thinks her body is ugly. Bindrim has her face each person in the group and tell him or her that “My body is ugly.”

“You’ve told everybody now,” Bindrim says, “We know what to expect. So it won’t be so bad.”

The girl sighs a deep sigh, and then smiles, and starts to laugh. Suddenly, we are all laughing at the silliness of it.

A tall, thin man who had said he was in the process of divorcing his wife is afraid he will have an erection. Another man says he is afraid all the other men will have erections and he won’t. Several men say they are afraid their penises will be considered small. Bindrim reaches behind him, produces a ruler, and holds it out before him. The room breaks up in laughter. There is no more talk about the size of penises, and more tension leaves the room. When several people say the apprehension of waiting to undress seems worse than actually undressing could possibly be, Bindrim decides it is time to go ahead with it.

The men and women undress in separate dressing rooms, and return to the paneled room. The lights are out and the room is in almost total darkness. We are told to close our eyes and “mill around” in a small area marked off with pillows and cushions set on the floor. We move about in the circle, cautiously at first, bumping, touching, feeling. It is impossible to tell whether the body you encounter is male or female. And in a very short time, it no longer occurs to you to wonder about it. It doesn’t matter any more. We are all just bodies, moving about together and experiencing a kind of human contact few of us had ever experienced before. Bindrim begins to hum a loud, bass MMMMMMMM. The rest of the group picks it up, as the milling bodies move tighter and tighter together in a knot at the center of the room. Finally, most of the movement stops. We all stand still, pressed tightly against one another, humming the common sound that binds us together into a single human organism.

Suddenly music is playing, and a slide projector is flashing colored slides on a mass of bodies. They separate, and begin to move in time with the music, dancing in a variety of styles from waltzes to frogs and Funky Broadway. Couples come together, dance a while, separate, and dance separately or move on to other partners as the phantasmagoric patterns of light and color flood the room with beauty and excitement. Regardless of their shape or size, our bodies are all beautiful. And by the time the lights come up our nudity is all but forgotten. Finally, we gather again in a circle on the floor. And the feeling is no different than it was before when we were clothed. Our nakedness appears to be fully accepted—ignored—even by those who were most apprehensive about nudity.

Bindrim announces that we must each single out the person in the group we like the least or feel most hostile to, and send him out of the room. A wave of fear sweeps the room. It will be terrible if it is me, we all think. And tension begins to mount. One by one, the fingers are pointed. Time after time, a finger is pointed at the psychiatrist, a lean, gray man of 57 who clutches a pipe in his teeth, an incongruous adjunct to his nakedness. Time after time people say they don’t like him because he seems to have an attitude of clinical detachment. There is a general feeling that he is behaving like an observer, and not becoming involved. Some people resent this bitterly.

Finally, it is the psychiatrist’s turn to point the finger, and he points it at the college professor who has sat quietly with little involvement thus far.

“He’s like a snake,” the psychiatrist says angrily when the man has left the room. “He’s the most snakelike person I’ve ever seen. I wouldn’t trust him with anything. He’s slimy and evil.”

The two male school teachers are sent out of the room together several times. People say they felt during the eyeballing that both were trying desperately to dominate them.

One of the teachers, a tall, blonde, handsome young man of 27 had wrestled with nearly everybody he confronted during the eyeballing, trying to pin them to the floor, both men and women. Finally it becomes his turn to send the person about whom he feels most hostile out of the room. “I want all of you to get the fuck out of here.”

Nobody moves.

“I mean it” he shouts. “Get the fuck out of here, all of you.”

We all look to Bindrim.

“Well,” he says. “Get out.”

We all get up and file out leaving only the teacher and Bindrim. It seems like a long time before we are allowed to return.

At last everyone has had his turn, and Bindrim asks if there is anybody to whom anyone now feels great hostility. Several people single out those they are angry with, and the pairs are made to face each other on all fours from opposite corners of the room, crawl toward each other, and confront each other, eye to eye.

The tall, thin personnel director singles out the woman school principal. Nothing happens in their confrontation. But in the verbal exchange that follows he becomes so depressed he appears to be about to cry.

“You want to cry,” Bindrim says. “Why don’t you cry?”

“I never cry,” the man answers. “I’m not a baby.”

Bindrim begins by trying to convince him it is all right to cry, and then begins to hound him, ordering him to cry, demanding that he cry.

He won’t. He can’t.

Suddenly a pretty girl who looks no more than 17 but is really 27 and a mother begins to sob uncontrollably.

“I’m crying FOR you,” she says between sobs.

“No don’t,” the man cries desperately. “You can’t cry for me, I’m not worth it.”

“But I am crying for you,” she wails.

“No, don’t, please don’t,” he says, moving toward her. They embrace, their bodies shaking with her sobs.

“No, no, no,” he wails. “You can’t do this.” Bindrim moves in on him with a soft, kindly voice, again telling him it is all right to cry.

“I’m a rock,” he shouts. “Rocks don’t cry.”

The drama goes on for nearly an hour until finally the man is convulsed with sobs, and the group moves to him urged on by Bindrim, picks him up, cradles him in their arms and rocks him like a baby.

And suddenly, he is a baby, emitting the choking, strained sobs of an infant.

“Where are you?” Bindrim asks. “What do you see. What are you feeling?”

“I’m hungry,” he wails. “And nobody will feed me.”

“Call somebody,” Bindrim urges him. “Somebody will come.”

“Nurse, nurse,” the man calls. “Come in here.” “Louder,” Bindrim orders. “Louder. Make her hear you.”

“Nurse,” he screams. “Get your ass in here, God damn you. I need you!”

The drama continues until Bindrim signals the group to place the man gently, exhausted, on the floor. But only after he has become convinced that the group cares deeply for him, loves him, weeps for him. He lies on the floor in awe, whispering over and over, “I can’t believe it. I just can’t believe it. But it’s true.”

The nurse and the reporter are put through similar, excruciating episodes before the night’s activities are concluded. By this time nearly everyone is emotionally drained, and filled with genuine warmth for everyone else. They have become a community, with a genuine bond of warmth and trust. At least most have. A few still cling tenaciously to their distrust and isolation.

It is nearly 5 a.m. by the time we gather together again in a tight circle, arms draped around shoulders. Bindrim distributes small glasses of wine, and announces that a period of complete silence will begin, and continue until the next day when he declares it is over. We listen to a record of an Alan Watts meditation accompanied by Indian music. When it ends we raise our glasses in a silent toast, and it is time for a few hours of sleep.

We crawl into sleeping ‘bags we have brought for the purpose, all placed at least three feet apart on the floor, as specified by Bindrim. We fall asleep quickly, contemplating all that has happened, and wondering what is still to come.

We awake at 9 a.m. to strains of the Bach Brandenburg Concertos. There is a simple breakfast for the drive to a private home where the rest of the encounter will be conducted in a swimming pool heated to body temperature.

Immediately upon arriving everybody begins undressing together beside the pool without a moment’s thought of hesitation or self-consciousness. One of the men suddenly notices that a very pretty girl is busily pulling off her panties a few feet from him. He laughs out loud at the beautiful naturalness of it. It is a long way from the nervous undressing in separate rooms of the night before.

We all slip into the pool. It is like being enveloped in a gentle womb. Men and women move about in the incredibly comfortable water embracing one another indiscriminately, rocking back and forth together, touching each others' faces and bodies, moving together into groups of two, three and four and locking themselves in warm, sincere embraces with no concern whatever for the sex of anyone else, holding hands, carrying each other about in the water.

The blond handsome school teacher stands alone, facing into a corner of the pool. Another man moves to him. There are tears and a look of desperate sadness on the teacher's face. The men embrace each other tightly, and the teacher begins to sob quietly.

Bindrim moves toward them and locks them both in a bear hug. And suddenly both men realize that they and Bindrim are kissing each other, on the shoulders, and the arms and the head. The teacher is weeping freely now, and his face is shining. The three stay locked together, rocking gently in the water, until Bindrim moves away to organize another activity.

We form two opposing lines facing one another in the chest high water. The political scientist, a big man with the finely chiseled features and physique of a movie idol, is the first to be picked up. He lies on the back and is passed along on the hands of the others, slowly with a rocking motion. Hands reach out and caress his body all over as he is moved slowly along.

In his well-tailored Brooks Brothers business suit the night before he had appeared completely impenetrable. He had taken little part in the interaction thus far. But suddenly he is weeping uncontrollably, as the people around him move in on him, grasp his hands, caress his forehead, wipe away his tears and embrace him tightly. The convulsive sobs diminish to a gentle weeping. But this time someone else has been placed on the human conveyor belt and is reacting to the beauty of the experience.

Many weep as they are passed along from hand to hand, some so tragically that those passing and caressing them begin to weep with them. One man's hysterical weeping changes gradually into hysterical laughter, and then a deep honest laugh that sets everybody else laughing. All activity stops for minutes while everybody looks at one another and laughs, until it finally subsides, and the conveyor belt is reactivated.

One man begins to wail in anguish as the skinny, corpse-like stiffened form of the former priest is passed before him, and the wailing subsides into quiet sobs, and then silence. The emotional intensity in the pool is a tangible thing. We all melt together in the warm water. And the moans or sobs of one become our common cries of anguish and pain.

After everyone has experienced the conveyor belt Bindrim climbs out of the pool and announces that the period of silence is ended. It is about 1 p.m. The silence has enveloped us for about nine hours. Although we are now permitted to talk, hardly anyone does for some time.

We form a tight circle in the water, arms wrapped around each others' shoulders and backs and listen to recordings of poetry and romantic, emotion-laden music. We lie back, eyes closed in the warm water, and allow our feet and legs to float up and tangle together in the circle's center. As strains of the love-death theme from "Tristan and Isolde" envelop us, several people begin to weep. Their weeping builds with the crescendo of the music, and subsides when the music subsides. Bindrim reads a selection from Kahlil Gibran, and it is time for lunch.

Although no one has even thought of food up to this point, at its mention we are all ravenously hungry. We have a lunch of sandwiches and potato chips and fruit, and begin to discuss what effect the experience in the pool has had on us. Nearly all uniformly speak of feelings of peace, and contentment, and love.

Suddenly the shorter of the two male school teachers thrusts his torso forward into the circle and glares from face to face. "You know what I feel?" he begins with controlled rage. "I feel shit. I feel shit. I hear you all talking love, and problems I can't do anything about, and I feel shit. I don't feel a God damned thing. And I don't care about anybody."

He picks up an empty half gallon milk carton he had been using as an ash tray. All eyes are riveted on him.

"You know what I feel like doing? I feel like taking this fucking box and smashing it." He brings his fist down again and again on the milk carton, smashing it flat. He misses it once, and strikes the concrete floor. Blood flows from his knuckles, but he does not notice.

"I hate you all," he shouts. "I hate the whole fucking bunch of you. I don't know anything about love. I hate you." He suddenly turns his anger on Bindrim alone.

“And you,” he shouts. “I don’t like you. You sit there like you know everything. That’s what I do all the time. I sit around on my ass like I know everything. And I don’t know a fucking thing.”

He stops speaking, but keeps glaring at Bindrim. There is a long silence. The teacher lights a cigarette with trembling fingers and begins puffing on it quietly, his anger abated.

Bindrim moves into the circle and squats to face him.

“Welcome,” he says. “This is the first time I’ve felt you were really here with us. I’m awful glad you’re here. And you don’t have to love everybody. It’s all right to be angry. It’s all right. What you did is real and honest, and I like that. I like that.”

After more discussion of the experience, there is another brief dip in the pool for saying goodbye, and the encounter is over. We dry off, dress, and prepare for the ride back to the center. It will be a silent ride. We are all reluctant to leave each other. But we know that it is over, and we accept it.

As we stand around waiting to get into the cars we talk about how everyone has changed during the 20 hours. There are few uptight faces left. A few faces are hardly recognizable as belonging to the same people who came nervously into the little paneled room some 20 hours earlier. So many strains and tensions have disappeared.

The recreation director, who had worn such a worried face into that room, is now radiantly beautiful. Everybody remarks about it. People who had been shy and withdrawn in the beginning are now outgoing and warm.

“Well, we’ve put our clothes on now, and I guess we’ve all slipped back into our isolated roles,” said one of the male teachers standing beside a car.

“I haven’t,” said the political scientist, now bundled tightly in his Edwardian topcoat. He grinned and pulled the teacher to him in a hug. The teacher threw his arms around him, and they stood together that way for what seemed like a long time as others nearby also embraced and said goodbye.

“You’re all just too much,” said the political scientist, tears streaming down his face. “This whole thing has been just too much to take.”

We were not quite the same people anymore. We were all at least a bit more open and trusting, and able to love. In a few, the change had been so dramatic as to be almost unbelievable. In a few others, it was barely perceptible. But it was there, where a smile and a twinkle in an eye had replaced an expression of hostility and distrust.

Bindrim considers nude group therapy “probably the most powerful psychotherapeutic tool in existence.”

“The fantastic emotional intensity we achieve in our best sessions is unheard of,” he said. “Most psychiatrists would be seeing psychotic breaks all over the place. But if we give a person lots of support and skin contact we can put him right in one and out the other.”

Participants are generally “ordinary people with everyday problems—the kind that in another day we used to just accept and put up with—like frigidity, for example.”

Bindrim forbids the use of alcohol or psychedelic drugs before or during sessions. He says he is “neither for nor against the drug scene. It depends on how the materials are used, and the circumstances in which they are used.”

When a nude marathon is over, Bindrim says, the participants go home in turned-on states very similar to what they would experience with drugs.

Encounters have a simple set of ground rules, one of which is “No fucking.”

“The object is not to get out and fuck,” Bindrim said. “That comes naturally. What we’re trying to do is love.”

When people make physical contact in the nude, he says, “It establishes an openness—a warmth and sense of community that doesn’t happen without nudity.”

Another reason fucking isn’t allowed, Bindrim said, is that “Society is not ready for fucking yet. It’s something we may possibly examine in the future.”

One thing Bindrim sought to find out in his work, he said, is: “Is it possible for human beings to have full body contact without wrapping themselves up fucking?” The answer became obvious very quickly.

“There is one hell of a lot more fucking goes on at any proper psychiatric convention, than at any of these sessions,” Bindrim noted.

Bindrim is considering phasing out his private practice to devote all of his time to nude therapy because he feels the marathons are much more effective than any other kind of therapy he has tried.

“I really don’t know where this can go,” he said. “It has one hell of a lot of potential. I haven’t yet even scratched the surface.”

# fifth estate

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