

Weekend Seminar

ENCOUNTER:

Revolution of Awareness

Editor's note: The following is not a news report; it was intended to be one, but the reporter found it impossible to observe without participating, and impossible to participate without becoming deeply involved. So this 'story' is one of about 30 personal impressions of an intense experience.

Revolutions are not usually made by two dozen students and teachers during a weekend in a quiet old Hants County farmhouse. Perhaps in the conventional sense, no revolution will result from last week's ENCOUNTER seminar at Dalhousie's Mount Martock ski lodge; but nearly 30 people acquired there a revolutionary enthusiasm for living their own lives.

Mike Quealey is not usually judged to be among the prophets; nor is he still conventionally considered a priest. But by confronting our group with the fact of our own closed minds, this York University history prof shocked even the most "broad-minded" into a realization of new ideas, new concepts, new confusions, new determinations. At ENCOUNTER, we were forced into confrontation with ourselves.

The theme of the weekend, if there was one, was Awareness. "You must be aware that you are making choices," said Mike, "or that choices are being made for you." Those who allow their lives to be lived for them are not really living at all; "Too many people don't want to opt for life," he said, and Karen O'Brien added, "Because they're afraid of living." She was only half right; many are not afraid of living, but are too stifled by everyday pressures to realize how little of our lives some of us are leading, or how much more pleasant life if for those who have the awareness and determination to live it for themselves.



Mike speaks - and two dozen listen. Then we began to think, and to speak our own minds. The constant challenge was to think and speak for ourselves.

MIND OPENING

For everyone, the weekend resulted in a mind-opening. For one, the experience of meeting and discussing with others may have provided one more valuable step towards personal development, another insight into things around him; for another, it may have been a first step -- the first great impulse to examine reality since years ago, when a doctor held him upside-down and delivered the slap which ushered him into the world with a jolt and a scream. We all returned from ENCOUNTER with a new dimension added to our viewpoints, new doors opened and new challenges thrust at us. This was true even for our "resource persons", the older people who went along to throw out questions to challenge all to think for ourselves: Mike, not inexperienced or, by conventional standards, young, went back to Toronto with new insights into younger people, their inclinations and motivations, Don Trivett, a chaplain at Dal, said he was impressed "especially by the human resources" he found at ENCOUNTER; "I didn't expect to find so much," he confessed. Ernst Schoenmaker, a Dutch Jesuit presently attached to St. Mary's felt the same.



Meal-time emphasized the community spirit of ENCOUNTER. Sunday afternoon's dinner (above) under chestnut trees beside the Mount Martock ski lodge, was termed by one of us "a sort of Thanksgiving meal." Serious discussions and light bull sessions also transpired on this lawn.

UNDEFINED AND DIVERSE

The weekend seminar was on the drawing-boards since late last year -- that's a lot of time in which to design a non-structure, but the effort was worth it. Karen O'Brien, John MacLachlan, and Emily Drysdale did the bulk of the work, but the results were due as well to the mixture of students, young teachers, and "resource persons" who took part. The only scheduled events were mealtimes, and all the discussions were informal. The group determined its own course right from our first meeting Friday night. It was almost by accident that the two scheduled topics for conversation actually were discussed. These were the implications to us of university education, and the relevance of christianity (both theological and philosophical) to we university students. The conclusions reached on these topics were as undefined and diverse as thirty different personalities and outlooks could make them. There was a definite feeling throughout, though, that too many professors are simply programming students rather than educating us; that we undoubtedly need to be guided particularly in our first year or two, but the emphasis is so heavily placed on training that there is no stimulus to approach ideas, and question apparent realities. Our university training doesn't look or feel like education; it doesn't SMELL like education. In short, everyone regrets that the technique found at ENCOUNTER -- forcing us to think for ourselves -- is so rarely demonstrated in the classroom.

SHARE THE EXPERIENCE

ENCOUNTER was an upsetting experience, because it challenged us to think for ourselves, and to live for ourselves. The challenge went out to all to decide our own positions on various issues, and then to decide whether to confront, negotiate with, or submit to those who impose systems and structures which we wish to reject. It was also a reassuring process: it brought realization that educators need not merely train people to enter the existing system -- even a professor of something as conventional and sometimes stodgy as history can try to turn people on to a sense of individualism; even a clergyman can move us to want to live our own lives by our own decisions, guided by our own beliefs. It was also a challenge -- not only a challenge to our own lives, but to confront those who were not there this weekend with a fresh awareness of "where we're at", to share the ENCOUNTER experience with others exactly like us in many ways, who were not there to be turned on by the atmosphere of community, of confrontation.

Everyone aware? Everyone leading his own life, peacefully and harmoniously? Surely this is a day-dream, the Millenium, said a doubter. "The Millenium is NOW", Mike replied. And he's right. If we want changes, we better start working for them now; and if we don't know whether or not we want changes, we better start thinking now. This is what we all learnt at ENCOUNTER, and this is what ENCOUNTER should be all about this year.



ENCOUNTER--meeting people, talking with people, giving of ourselves and drawing others out of themselves. The most productive discussions were held when everybody was bright and fresh, but some stayed up to see the new day dawn. Informal and relaxed, yet intense. This was ENCOUNTER.