

Fall, 1994

History and Origins of Interhelp

Interhelp, Whence and Whither?

DESIGN FOR A PLAY IN THREE ACTS

By Virginia L. Senders

The setting:

The United States in the late 1970's. Jimmy Carter is president; the cold war is in a state of total mobilization. Among the people, especially school children and newspaper readers who know how to read between the lines, there is fear. The fear is of THE BOMB. Missiles, bombs, delivery systems, tonnage, multiple warheads, targeting — these words are on the lips of the Secretary of Defense and of the check-out girl at the supermarket. Armageddon seems probable if not actually imminent. Fourth-graders wake up with nightmares — and so do their parents.

I hear Helen Caldicott and then, a few nights later, wake up during a thunderstorm screaming because I think *it* is happening. Though pupils no longer practice diving under their desks, which everyone finally agrees is absurd, FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) advises us that in case we are told to evacuate, it's a good idea to keep our gas tanks half

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The Cast of Characters

We list here only five, who were interviewed for this article. They will introduce others who were important to their work, the work that drew them all together, the work that has drawn all of you in some way together with them. In order of appearance on our stage they are:

Bob Fuller, nuclear physicist, former president of Oberlin College, alarmed and concerned citizen.

Fran Peavey, owner of a not-too-commercially-successful furniture shop in Oakland, concerned and thoughtful citizen, heart-centered political activist, wondering how the people can be awakened.

Ioanna Macy, Buddhist scholar, just returned from field work in Sri Lanka, a teacher and activist experiencing her own grief and sometimes despair about the state of the world.

Kevin McVeigh, former professor of comparative religions, peer counseling teacher, and anti-nuclear activist in the Bay area.

Sarah Pirtle, peace educator in western Massachusetts, feeling the grief for the earth, the despair, expressing it through song and movement, helping others to do the same.

Ioanne Sunshower, also interviewed, does not appear as a major character on our stage until well into the second act, although she was there among the minor players much earlier. An interview with Michael Rice was also invaluable.

Today, in 1994, each of these characters sees with his or her own eyes the events of the 70s and 80s that led to the formation and continuation of Interhelp. Probably each sees his or her own role as the central focus of a diffuse series of happenings in which some of the others played peripheral roles. What is central and sharp in the eyes of one may be out of focus or of minor consequence in the eyes of the others. Amazingly, though their stories are differently focused, they do not conflict.

Interhelp: Whence?

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full and adds the suggestion that we include extra underwear in the little suitcase that we pack. Not only the continued existence of our own lives seems threatened but of life itself. And although many of us are trying, we seem powerless to stop the proliferation and the escalation.

Act I, the Founding:

Bob Fuller, the nuclear physicist, knows in his gut and his head what even one nuclear explosion would mean to humanity. He is terribly worried, too, about the cold war and growing tensions with the Soviet Union. Like many of us, he aches with the pervasive fear of the decade and asks himself constantly what he can do. Two kinds of answers emerge.

First, he thinks, we are all so terrified of this nuclear explosion that we become stupefied. Our thinking goes no further than the detonation. What if we were to make actual preparations for damage control? What if we were to surround an explosion, engulf it, contain it? What if we had a squad of people trained to provide first aid, decontamination, and all the other functions

that might be needed? No, such a squad couldn't undo what had been done, but it might help prevent escalation, particularly if an explosion were accidentally set off. Suppose one errant missile got away heading for Moscow and we sent the hotline message (backed up with guarantees) that 200,000 troops in cargo planes were coming in to clean up the mess? At least, world opinion might prevent that one horrible accident from becoming an even more horrible holocaust. In fact, now that nuclear bombs exist, and will probably never not exist, would it not make sense to maintain permanent brigades, all over the world, trained and ready to undertake such a task? [In 1994 Bob muses that such a squad could have made an enormous difference at Chernobyl.] You might call the team "The Humpty-Dumpty Rescue Team." Bob offers the proposal to the head of FEMA, who nods and does nothing more.

Who would be the people responsible for the actual work of disaster assistance? Police and firefighters, he thinks, including among them many superpatriots who scoff at the idea of a nuclear threat to our country. What would be the effect on them of the training for such a task? Might this not dramatically break through denial? Bob talks it over with his then-wife, Alia Johnson, and with friend David Hoffman.

Fran Peavey, who owns the furniture store, is not making much money at it, perhaps because she is really

concerned with the needs of homeless people, and homelessness and furniture stores are a poor match. She meditates also about the nuclear danger, and she has a friend, David Hoffman, who introduces her to Bob and Alia. She joins the other three to help make the project happen. This benevolently conspiratorial quartet, with much secrecy and almost fanatical dedication, continues to work on the idea. They call themselves "Humpty Dumpty" and meet as a support group, swapping stories of their nuclear nightmares. They think that perhaps if they could stop resisting the very thought of nuclear war, could take it into themselves, so to speak, new energy would be released and new visions emerge. Bob, against their fearful resistance, teaches his fellow conspirators the technical side of nuclear warfare.

Joanna Macy, at this time, is experiencing grief for the planet and despair about her inability to do anything to change what appears to her to be a course of planetary suicide. Anti-nuclear work, including efforts to shut down dangerous reactors, leads her to explore ways of breaking through the denial, the numbness that seems pandemic. She experiments with an ongoing meditation group that she co-leads. In 1978, at a conference for college faculty and administrators at The University of Notre Dame, she facilitates a week-long working group on planetary survival issues. There, moving away from a didactic style of presentation, she introduces experiential work, encouraging the participants to stay grounded and connected as they face the terror. The effect is electrifying. People are profoundly moved, and, strangely, even exhilarated. Joanna knows that a corner has been turned, and she coins the term "despair work." In the summer of 1979, she publishes an article, How to Deal with Despair, in the magazine *New Age*. It receives more reader response than any article the magazine has ever published. The next summer, 1980, at the Ben Lomond Center, Joanna and Joe Havens conduct the first Despair and Empowerment workshop. One of those in attendance is Fran Peavey, who immediately introduces Joanna to her quartet of conspirators. After spending a long weekend together in western Marin County, this group comes up with the name Interhelp. Joanna sees the possibility of using Interhelp as a venue for her Despair and Empowerment work, which is becoming more central to her life than she had expected.

An organization begins to take shape. Kevin McVeigh, who, with Barbara Hazard, has been leading workshops on "Living in the Nuclear Age," goes to one of Fran Peavey's workshops and sees the convergence of her work with his own. He becomes involved with Interhelp, and works in the newly established Interhelp office in San Francisco. David Hoffman produces two issues of a publication, almost a paperback book, called

Evolutionary Blues. Other important early players, whose creativity and support give impetus and direction to Interhelp, include John Steiner, Chellis Glendinning, and Barbara Hazard. Act I ends with talk of a national gathering at Isis Oasis, in northern California, organized by Fran and Joanna.

Curtain

Entr'acte:

Bob Fuller exits, leaving behind the psychological work that is Interhelp. He turns, instead, to his second answer to his nuclear worries. Remember that he has been distressed by cold war tensions. What were the Russians really like, he had asked himself. Popular presentations portray them as weird as Martians. Even before his thoughts of the Humpty-Dumpty Rescue Team, Bob had set out to learn for himself and had toured the Soviet Union twice, once in the sixties and once in the seventies. In fact, he found that the Russians seemed very different from us. They spouted propaganda and slogans, afraid to show him their true selves, but occasionally, he recollected, there were inklings.

As 1981 flows into 82, Fuller sets out to change the peoples of the world, determined to challenge the conditions that lead to escalation of tensions. With wife and baby and 200 diapers, he sets out across the Trans-Siberian Railroad. As a physicist and former college president he is in demand on the lecture circuit, and on more than one occasion follows a lecture on American higher education with a platform demonstration of how an American diaper is changed. To Israel and Egypt they go, and Ireland and Africa, to many places in the world where conflict and danger threaten. Again and again the presence of this family, as a family, humanizes relationships and creates friends out of sloganizers. How to enlarge this human-to-human contact? How to build a corps of citizen diplomats? While Bob is musing about these questions, Kim Spencer and his wife Evelyn Messenger are considering the vast possibilities of TV in building people-to-people contacts. Bob joins with them, and later enlists David Hoffman and his prodigious fund-raising talents to build up a program. The group eventually uses TV to set up space-bridges, where satellite transmission permits Soviet citizens to talk, person to person, in real time, with their American counterparts. Carl Sagan appears on one program, and the Soviets bring some of their best people to represent them, which in turn is reflected in the quality of Americans who participate. The group (calling themselves "Mo-Tzu" after a Chinese citizen-diplomat of 2500 years ago) works with a small group of Soviets who

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seem to have access to the Kremlin; they are the lieutenants of a man named Gorbachev. The program is sold to ABC. In 1982 Mo-Tzu spawns *Internews*, in 1994 a successful multi-million dollar non-profit operation. David Hoffman is its leader, Spencer and Messenger its principal creative talents, and Bob Fuller a consultant. Its current mission is teaching and helping the countries of the former Soviet Union to develop an independent media. Shared memories and a common ancestry link it with Interhelp.

Act II. An Organization:

It is time for a conference. In 1981 Fran Peavey and Joanna Macy make up an invitation list; Charlie Varon and Myra Levy, along with Fran, do the organizing. They are surprised by a deluge of requests, including some from the East coast and from the Midwest. The conference, held at Isis Oasis in Northern California, is not called to found a new membership organization. It is a gathering that brings together people who are frightened and courageous, determined and creative, to learn from each other and encourage each other in new-sprouted ideas. Nobody is designated a "member," nor are there officers. A network, with permeable membranes to permit oozing in and oozing out, is emerging organically. The conference planners put big sheets of paper all over the walls, and the attendees write down what they can offer and what they want for themselves. A new people-creature is emerging. This is the first Interhelp Gathering. Fran sells her furniture store and commits herself to working full-time as the change agent she has already been on a part-time basis for ten years.

From this vibrant gathering a Bay area support group and then an organizational structure emerges almost willy-nilly. Despair and Empowerment is its central vision and activity. Kevin McVeigh is its Executive Officer. Myra Levy creates *Humpty-Dumpty Reports*, a cross between a newsletter and a magazine. Eventually that publication turns into *Awakening in the Nuclear Age* and then into simply *Awakening*, with Rosa Lane as its first editor.

Massachusetts becomes a hub of Interhelp activity. Joanna, Kevin, and Sarah Pirtle conduct D & E workshops at Interface in Boston and other sites in the east; then a national gathering is held in Rockport, Mass., and in 1983 the office moves to Northampton, Mass. Joe Havens and his wife Teresina host a D & E "think tank" at Temenos, their western Massachusetts retreat center for activists.

Joe, who had conducted the first D & E workshop with Joanna in 1980, and Sarah Pirtle are also working

together, looking for words, trying to find a language to describe what people see and feel for the earth. Much of their work is conceptual. An arc, they think, moving through despair and then — a turning. Sarah, teaching tai chi chuan to children and adults, is looking for ways to help people know the earth through moving with it and mourning it. Joe, a unique lover of earth and trees and people and peace, seeks the same goals. Together they put on a workshop at the Traprock Peace Center (located on Woolman Hill in Deerfield, Mass.) They are reminded of the despair and empowerment work of Joanna and Fran and Chellis Glendinning, and a merger is inevitable. For Sarah, thoughts of the work become totally engrossing. Driving, walking, doing the laundry — she is absorbed with the vision of a new kind of organization, one built on shared leadership, with lots of song and movement, valuing the contributions of every individual. How to do it? Talking together these and other Interhelpers, including Barbara Hazard, Myra Levy, and Tova Green, hold planning marathons before each Gathering. They evolve such practices as support groups, the fish bowl, the well, affinity groups, respectful treatment of the children — practices that survive happily in Interhelp gatherings to this day.

Sarah Pirtle meets Kevin McVeigh, and their romance takes place in the loving vision of hundreds of Interhelpers. After their marriage as before, Interhelp is the major life focus for both. When Ryan is born, three months premature at two-and-a-quarter pounds, half of Interhelp knows and holds its collective breath through the weeks that follow. As he grows a little older his flaming red hair becomes a familiar sight at gatherings; he comes to look on all the gathered as his uncles and aunts. Ten years later, in 1991, many Interhelpers are saddened by the end of this marriage, born and nurtured in their midst.

From 1981 through 1988 there is a National Gathering each year, alternating between the coasts. With a hub of activity and an office in the Bay area and a scattering of midwesterners, the organization is national and becoming international. It remains always, however, an anti-hierarchical kind of organization. Shared leadership, song and feeling, support and play, mutuality and creativity are its ways of being, and not by-laws or Roberts' Rules. From 1983 to 1988 Interhelp contacts are first created and then broadened and deepened in the Soviet Union, with leadership from Fran Macy (Joanna's husband) and Barbara Hazard, Adi Bemak, Philip Bennett, and Ray Stiefel.

1983 is the year of *The Day Before Project*, created by Wendy Roberts. A forthcoming commercial TV program on nuclear holocaust has been announced with much fanfare. People have been told that it will be so horrible that children should not be allowed to see it,

