

Learning to love the world: A reflection on Teresa von Sommaruga Howard's Foulkes Lecture and Study Day

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In this personal reflection on Teresa von Sommaruga Howard's Foulkes Lecture and Study Day (von Sommaruga Howard, 2025), I explore my experience of the event, and share how Teresa's take on Foulkes, de Maré, and the convening of larger groups has come to influence my thinking/practice as a convenor of groups in organizational and community settings.

Key words: Thien, Stacey, von Sommaruga Howard, Arendt, Complexity, Large Group

In the small group, you learn to love yourself. In the large group, you learn to love the world.

I was privileged to be asked to be one of the conveners of the three large groups that formed the bulk of the Study Day following Teresa von Sommaruga Howard's Foulkes Lecture the previous evening — my fellow conveners being Mike Tait and Fiona Parker. The title of Teresa's lecture sparked my thinking about the images that might emerge if I attempted to transfer my experience of the architecture of the large group to a drawing board. Something akin to the intricate sketches made by Escher immediately came to mind — paradoxical, illusory, disconcerting — but these were quickly dismissed as being too neat, too static, too fixed in time and space to do justice to my large group experiences through the years.

During my continued reflections in the days and weeks that followed I chanced upon Madeleine Thien's novel, *The Book of Records* (Thien, 2025a). In an interview celebrating the book's launch, Thien shared, 'A fiction writer, I think, in their heart must believe that there are truths only the imagination can reach. And they are not the only truths' (Thien, 2025b). Thien's imagination has certainly helped me to make a better sense of not only how the architecture of the large group differs from that of the small, but also, and more importantly, it has helped me to articulate how the purpose and focus of attention differs in small and large group processes.

The Book of Records is set in a strange architectural structure called *The Sea*. *The Sea*, a conclave of buildings situated on an actual sea, is a way station for the displaced, 'a place to touch land for a moment before continuing [your] journey into the unknown to find a home' (Thien, 2025b). The people arriving at *The Sea* have been displaced due to hundreds of thousands of kilometres of land having been returned to water — the reasons for which are not immediately apparent. The main protagonists in the novel, Lina and her father, Wui Shin, arrive at *The Sea* from Foshan, China, having left behind 'a mother, a brother, and an aunt' (Thien, 2025b).

On arriving at *The Sea*, Lina's father tells her that 'these buildings, which seem to wrap through and between one another, and over and surround one another . . . [are] made of time . . . When they walk in one direction they end up in the opposite . . . like following the curves of a knot that travels under and through itself' (Thien, 2025b).

Thien's conception of *The Sea* resonates with my early experiences of the *Creating Large Group Dialogue in Organizations and Society* (CLGD) programme and research community. CLGD was founded by Teresa, in 2019, to bring together a group of people who were all interested in developing their capabilities as participants who could work with large groups in their everyday work, and some who were also interested in convening them. CLGD works with the large group perspective developed by Patrick de Maré and built on by Teresa.

Thien's description of the buildings that make up *The Sea* as being like 'the curves of a knot that travels under and through itself', resonates with my experience of stepping into CLGD. The one thing that members of the inaugural group on CLGD had in common was a connection to Teresa. On CLGD, boundaries are porous, people come and go, and the history of relationships is complex and messy, with a mix of overt and covert relations of power. One can often find oneself walking in one direction and ending up in the opposite!

I first encountered this way of working on the Doctorate in Management (DMan) programme at the University of Hertfordshire (UH). The DMan started out as a co-creation between Ralph Stacey and colleagues at UH, and Chris Rance and colleagues at the Institute of Group Analysis (IGA). Ralph had completed his training as a Group Analyst in 1998, and he was keen to run the DMan, which began in 2000, along group analytic lines. My involvement as a student on the DMan (2008–2011) catalysed my formal introduction to and ongoing engagement with group analysis and the IGA.

To date, I have been involved in an Experiential Group (2009), and completed the Foundation Course (2014), the inaugural Reflective Practice in Organizations programme (2016), the Diploma in Group Work Practice, at Turvey (2020), and Creating Large Group Dialogue in Organizations and Society (2019– present). Through all these trainings, it has been the community meetings, the experiential groups, and the large group interactions that have been most useful and most pertinent to my work in organizational development, consultancy, and academia. Currently as Senior Lecturer in Executive Education at Liverpool John Moores University.

In her lecture/article Teresa posits that Patrick de Maré was ‘perhaps more open to Foulkes’ non-psychoanalytic ideas’ because he was not a trained psychoanalyst. Adding that ‘Foulkes’ focus was on healing patients’ whereas de Maré ‘encouraged members of his groups to approach larger social situations with courage and voice to help develop true citizenship and democracy’ (von Sommaruga Howard, 2025).

Teresa is not the first person to point to the tension for Foulkes between the push of group analysis and the pull of psychoanalysis. Farhad Dalal, for example, describes this conflict as ‘radical Foulkes’ struggling with ‘orthodox Foulkes’ (Dalal, 1998). Teresa is however one of the first to provide a comprehensive exploration of why this might be. Teresa positions Foulkes’ ambivalence as not something that is rooted in his family history, but rather as a product of the socio-political context/situation in which he found himself. Not least, the trauma of fleeing Nazi Germany to start anew in the UK.

Psychoanalytic explanations of the human condition are so deeply embedded in what Elias termed the *habitus* (Elias, 1991), that they are difficult to shift. Adopting the argument that Teresa puts forward for de Maré, above, one might also argue that one of the reasons for the relative ease with which Teresa can work with Foulkes’ more revolutionary ideas is because she is neither trained as a psychoanalyst nor

traditional group analyst. Psychotherapeutic understandings of being human that may have made sense to specific groups of people, in specific parts of the world (the Global North), at specific points in time, have become less useful as ways of living and being, and notions of family, sexuality, gender, have shifted and changed.

In *The Sea*, when people look out onto the actual sea, the sea they see, and experience, is individual to them. Put another way — the sea I see is different from the sea that you see. We need to be alive to the potential for clinging too tightly to the notion that the sea that we each see is the sea that Foulkes saw back in the early decades of the 20th-century. Leaving aside the changes that will have occurred in Foulkes' own view of the sea over the years, the sea he looked out onto was never the same sea that was looked on by people of a different gender, a different class, a different sexuality — let alone a different heritage, a different world view (the Global South), a different way of living and being. Svend Brinkmann, writing on *LinkedIn* about his forthcoming book, *Human Ethics*, argues:

In order for us to behave properly towards each other, and even help others who are struggling, we need to talk to them and listen carefully and not just put people in boxes to fit the theories we have in advance. (Brinkmann, 2025)

Does this mean abandoning the epistemological and ontological practice of psychoanalysis and small group therapy? No, of course not, they are still important, not least because they are so engrained in the culture. But what it might mean is that we can begin to countenance alternative views of the psyche, and different understandings of relationships and identity, rather than clinging onto ideas that are outmoded, and have been for some time. It might also mean that we begin to acknowledge different cultural perspectives on the self and the social, rather than inadvertently or wantonly looking to colonize pedagogies that differ from our own. And finally, it might mean that we explore notions of the collective, the relational, and the social from a range of different cultures, not as novel or alien ideas, but as ways of thinking and doing that were once part of the cultural heritage of the Global North.

And this brings me to the second insight that Madeleine Thien's novel has helped me to articulate. In the *Book of Records*, one of Lina's three neighbours in *The Sea* is the echo/spirit/avatar of Hannah Arendt, the others being the philosopher, Baruch Spinoza, and the poet, Du Fu. Thien's exploration of Arendt's early life, put me back

in touch with Arendt's book, *The Human Condition* (Arendt, 1998), and her conception of *Amor Mundi*, or love of the world. In an article exploring Arendt's poetry, Daegan Miller describes *The Human Condition* as 'a beautiful and difficult text, [that] seeks to understand how the West came to regard the world with loathing and searched for salvation in both artificial life and the isolation of interiority' (Miller, 2025).

This reconnection with the work of Arendt, my experience of Teresa's Foulkes Lecture and Study Day, and my six-year involvement in CLGD got me thinking about the difference for me between small group ways of thinking and working, and large group ways of thinking and being. As Teresa argues, it is not about the numbers, it is about purpose and focus of attention. Which brings me to the rather over simplistic assertion at the top of this piece. In the small group, you learn to love yourself. In the large group, you learn to love the world.

Miller argues that 'Arendt thought that among the most important ways the world-loving humans expressed that love of life was through thinking' (Miller, 2025). For Samantha Rose Hill, Arendt's love of, or for the world is 'a challenge to think about what it means to be committed to the world, to care for the world despite its horrors. There is a provocation to embrace one another in our difference and to meet one another as fellow human beings' (Hill, 2017). This has echoes of *Koinonia*, the term that Pat de Maré used to describe 'impersonal fellowship' (de Maré, 2012). For Hill:

In teaching us to love the world Arendt is teaching us to be thinking, engaged citizens. She cautions us against the impulses of sentiment or affect and guides us toward political thinking. Loving the world offers us a way of being in the world that plants our feet firmly in reality, so that we can see what is before us. (Hill, 2017)

Teresa's Foulkes Lecture and Study Day provided an insight into the thinking and practice that the community of researchers are engaged in on CLGD. Working in this way has also given me an insight into what Ralph Stacey saw in Foulkes' thinking and practice that resonated with the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey, 2012). Ralph's successor as Director of the DMan, Professor Chris Mowles, talking about his experience of convening experiential groups for the IGA, sums this up well:

Participating in a group is a practical experience of uncertainty: themes come and go, not everything that gets said gets picked up, and if there can be said to be 'progress' in the group, then it tends to be elliptical and sometimes crabwise. Experiential groups can thoroughly undermine the idea of if-then causality. To a degree, groups are an antidote to instrumental thinking, encouraging instead a more open-minded critical reflexivity. (Mowles, 2025)

A more nuanced way articulating the difference in architecture between the small group and the von Sommaruga Howardian larger group way of working might be:

Working from the orthodox, small group perspective established by Foulkes, provides one with the opportunity of learning to love oneself. Working from the radical, large group perspective established by de Maré, and built on by von Sommaruga Howard, opens up the possibility of learning to love the world.

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