

ON DIRECTING "HOLYOKE"

Margaret J. Rioch, Ph.D.

Since I was the very first of the American directors of what used to be the Mount Holyoke Conference now to be held at Vassar College, I assume you want to hear what it was like in the old days, about a thousand years ago, namely back in 1969 and earlier. Albert Kenneth Rice, who had directed the first American conference in 1965 and all of the rest through 1969, died in the fall of 1969 having directed the June Holyoke Conference that year, and having been on the staff of the then Amherst Conference which had gone through its second turnover from Ken Rice to me in 1968, and in 1969 to Roger Shapiro. Parenthetically that was the fascinating year when Wilfred Bion, our spiritual ancestor, appeared for the first time on the staff of an American Conference. It was the first and the last time, as a matter of fact, that he had been on any Group Relations Conference staff. Roger Shapiro invited him to make his way from Los Angeles, where he then lived, to Amherst, Massachusetts. That was a stellar staff, as you can see, with not only Roger and me and other "great" Americans, but also Wilfred Bion and Kenneth Rice.

But to get back to Holyoke, Dr. Albert Kenneth Rice died on November 15, 1969. In those days, chiefly because of the difficulties in communicating between England and America, we tended to be very forehanded about brochures. The one for the next June was already prepared and at the printer in November with A.K. Rice listed as director. For the past several years I had been Associate Director. The whole staff too was already in place, having been approved by the Director and the Associate Director. Although we of the American staff knew that Ken had not been in good health in the summer, we had not known that his ailment was so serious, indeed fatal. He had just worked with us in August, and although he coughed a lot, he got through his duties with his usual energetic enthusiasm and I remember his commenting that Bion, in spite of his advanced age, was in excellent form, and had only once seemed to be a bit at a loss to find his way in the maze of Amherst buildings.

Ken Rice's death was, of course, a terrible loss to us institutionally, but it was also an extremely great loss to me personally, perhaps more than to most other Americans, for he had become a very dear friend, quite apart from being a mentor and teacher in conference practice and theory. It is not unusual to catch me now that I am in my eighties, in memory lapses, but the events of those two weeks, almost 20 years ago, I remember as if they were yesterday. I recall sitting in the already familiar Mt. Holyoke College classroom with

staff members in a curved row on either side of me. I opened the conference, as I remember vividly, with the words: "Ladies and Gentlemen, this conference was to have been directed by Kenneth Rice. As you no doubt know, he died last fall and I am directing in his place with the agreement of the staff. From left to right they are---" I do not remember in what order they were sitting, but they included Eric Miller, who was the only British staff member. The Americans were: Marvin Geller, Larry Gould, Bill Hausman, Ed Klein, Garrett O'Connor, Roger Shapiro, and me. (two other staff members have since died, namely Arden Flint and Kenn Rogers). Our Administrators, without whom nothing at all could have been accomplished, were Blinn Van Mater and Rosa Torres from the Washington School of Psychiatry, as they had been from the beginning of the first American Conference. Van Mater has since retired and may have died and Rosa Torres has gone her separate way. I had painstakingly checked with all the staff members to make sure that they would willingly work with me as director. Actually I could not have hoped for a more collaborative staff.

Whether it was a wise decision or not, I decided that I did not want to direct the Holyoke Conference again. This one had been more than enough emotional strain for a while. The next Director was Bill Hausman, and after him was Roger Shapiro who is not here to speak for himself, so I should like to say that he directed very elegantly, as is his style, and that he brought Pierre Turquet once again into the Holyoke staff. I should like to quote now a little bit from the Obituary I wrote at the time of Ken Rice's death.

"More than anyone I have ever known or known about, Ken Rice prepared for succession. It is almost as if he knew he would die an early death. Even with the burden of his loss very, very heavy upon us, I think we, in the United States, must say that he could not have prepared us better if he had foreseen the precise moment of his death. In spite of misgivings which he and I both shared, he urged me to direct the second American one-week conference in 1967 at Amherst. He strongly supported my wish to have several Americans trained who could rotate in the position of director in the various conferences that we had already had, including a new one that summer in California. He wanted to see this take place as early as possible and was gratified to be present at the second 'handover' from himself to me and then to Roger Shapiro in 1969 at Amherst. One of the important lessons that Ken Rice by his own example taught about leadership was how to give it up.

Another one had to do with charismatic leadership. We were all familiar with his deep dislike and distrust of it. An easy way to tease Ken was to accuse him of

being full to the brim of charisma himself and to say further that that was why he was so effective. He had various responses. One was that at least he struggled against it. I think that in this struggle lay the key to much that was deep and fine and not very simple in Ken Rice. Perhaps he knew, partly at least, how easy it was or would have been for him to sway people on a purely emotional basis. Sometimes he found himself surprised at how much weight his words carried, and how difficult it was for someone to act independently of his recommendations. Sometimes he became very angry when people put responsibility on his shoulders which he thought they should have kept for themselves. He struggled hard not to be the leader of a 'basic assumption dependency' group. And it was a struggle, both because of the group's tendency to lean on him, and also because of the temptation which this presented to him. I think it was this temptation which made him so violent on the subject of charisma. He would not allow himself the soft luxury of being idolized or even of being loved dependently, though surely he wanted both in some corner of himself.

Ken was a dramatic person. He held an audience well and easily and he loved to do it. He was usually the center of any social group he was in, dominating the conversation with his flow of talk, with stories about Africa or India, with his brilliant, quickly formulated answers to difficult questions, and charming young and old, men and women, with his enthusiasm and his forthrightness. However, he never gave the impression of seeking the spot-light. He also engaged in other kinds of drama. Conference members knew how he drew fire to himself and struck out in righteous wrath, not in a petty way, but with all the force of his convictions and his insistence on what he believed to be true. Staff members knew how that he did this for the last time when he caught himself wondering whether or not he should slam the door behind him, thus realizing that it was a 'performance'. But what, after all, is or is not a performance when one is on public show? How difficult it is to say with complete honesty that one's act was authentic and not done with half an eye or more to the audience? How, indeed, when, as a teacher, one acts for the benefit of the students? The word 'act' itself carries with it this ambiguity.

The dramatic and performance aspect of the conferences was surely one of the things which drew Ken to them over and over even though, as he said, he sat on the edge of his bed at 3:00 a.m. in the middle of many conferences, swearing to himself that he would never run another one. 'Why do we do these things?', he asked himself and us and never gave or got really a

satisfactory answer. But almost everyone likes to do what he does well. Ken had found a way of putting his performing arts into a service which brought riches to most of those who were present and left him none the poorer. He sat at the center of a stage which he had created and was asked by everyone, both members and staff, to be hero, villain, conqueror, victim, - and also producer and director. Of course, as a good performer he enjoyed all of these roles and played them well - up to a point, at which with disciplined grace he declined all offers and said in effect, "The show is up to you." Perhaps his deepest teaching of all lay in his steadfast refusal to accept personal authority over others when they would so gladly have given it and when perhaps in part he himself would so gladly have received it.

Selfishly we might wish he had lived longer, but, as we heard by cable from Pierre Turquet, "Ken Rice died peacefully of cancer after only approximately a fortnight in a London hospital."