# Consciousness Raising

## Opening the Door to Liberation

*by Ruth Dinerman*

When I started organizing a consciousness-raising (CR) group, most people found out about it by word of mouth. This has some advantages and some disadvantages. Since all the people in the group knew each other, at least by name, a strong sense of trust was built up very quickly. But since most of the people were in the same high school, there was no kind of anonymity. If you want to start a CR group, it is important to ask yourself if you want to know the people in advance, or not. If not, I would suggest making posters and placing them around your town, and neighboring towns also.

At the first meeting, ask everyone if they will talk for a few minutes about why they came, what they expect from the group, and what consciousness-raising'' means to them. This is usally a good opener, and can help the group to see where it might be heading. Stress *confidentiality*. It is important that people trust that the feelings and experiences brought out in the group will remain *in* the group, and will not be spread around outside.

Stress skills in listening, and showing support for other people in the group. There will come a time when women will have a difficult time coming to terms with a new insight. Show you care! Try and talk as personally and as openly as possible. Once a norm is set for people to be open and questioning, the group will flourish.

At the end of each meeting, try to set up a topic for the next week (meetings should be weekly). Some possible topics are:

• *Early childhood experiences* — feelings about being born female, differences between being brought up as a female and your brothers and male friends. Tomboyism? What did playing with dolls teach you? How do you remember perceiving marriage? Was it always considered an inevitable part of your future? How open were your future plans for education, lifestyle, work, independence?

• *Early sexual experiences* — How did you find out about sex? Was it as something to be ashamed of? Proud of? Who told you about sex? Older kids? Parents? Books? etc.

• *Relations with father* — Do you get along well with your father? Does he see you as ''his little girl?'' Is he protective? Is he at all sexual towards you? Is he the breadwinner of the family? Does he show emotions? Is he open?

• *Relations with mother* — Does she work? Do you resent her? Why? Is your mother protective? Do you talk with her about sex? Are you honest with her? How does she treat other women? Does your mother call her friends ''the girls?''

• *Your brothers and sisters* — Do you fight often? Is your brother allowed to do more things than you are? If you are the oldest, were you given extra responsibility in bringing up your other siblings? Do you resent that? Look at how the toys you had and the toys your brother had were the same, or different. What do the toys teach?

• *How do you feel about your body* — Do you feel attractive? Too skinny? Too fat? Too breasty? Not breasty enough? What kind of body would you most like to have? Where did you get this image? Has advertising affected your conception of beauty? How do you feel when some male whistles at you? Or makes a pass at you? How did you feel about your body before you reached adolescence (sorry about the ickiness of that word)? How do you feel when people tell you you're beautiful? Do you want to change your body? Name three things you like about your body. (Nose jobs and dyed hair do notcount.) How about three things you don't like about your body.

• *How do you feel about the male body* — Is it mysterious ? Do you find it beautiful? Are you afraid of it (or timid)? How did you find out what the male body looked like? Were you embarrassed? How do you feel about other women's bodies? Is it something to be ashamed of, or something you can share with other women?

• *Have you ever felt a sexual attraction to other women* — Are these feelings repressed or expressed? Do you feel ashamed or comfortable about these thoughts? Why?

• *How do you feel about menstruation* — How did you feel when you first got your period? Who was the first person you told? How did you first find out about it? Did you feel funny because you got it too early or too late?

• *How do you feel about female peers* — Competition? Do you feel a special closeness to females? Do you think women can't be trusted? Would you break a date with a female, if a guy called you up? Has this ever been done to you? How did you feel?

• *How do you get attracted to males* — Do you fantasize a lot? What kind of fantasies? Is your attraction based on an illusion or some definite human being? Do you think of the ''one man who can carry you off into the sunset?''

• *Sexuality* — Have you had sex? Have you had intercourse? Did you feel guilty afterwards? Do you feel inadequate if you have never had sex? Did you feel pressure from your mate to ''go further?'' Did you ever have an orgasm? Did you ever fake having an orgasm? Do you think of virginity as something sacred? Something to get rid of? Do you like sensuality as much as sexuality? Is there a difference in your partner's response to sensuality (i.e. massages, sleeping *beside* someone)? And sexuality? Did you ever feel you were just a cunt? Why? Do you see sex along with a commitment or just for pleasure?

A very helpful book to read is: *Women's Fate* by Claudia Dreifus, Bantam Books (paperback), $1.25. This book is the transcripts from a CR group, plus an introduction which will be useful in starting your own group.

P.S. My group has chosen to have very little structure — so we usually just have conversations about several topics. There is another way, which is to have everyone at the meeting talk for about five minutes without interruption (except clarification questions) about the topic at hand. Only after everyone has talked is the floor opened to discussion. This is useful if you have some very silent women and some very dominant women — so this allows everyone to talk, and explore without harassment (which should be minimized anyway), or interruption.

**Ruth Dinerman is class of '76, in Maplewood, New Jersey.**

***Consciousness Raising: It can be as simple as getting together with young women in your neighborhood once a week after school.***