
CHAPTER TEN

OFFERING WORKSHOPS AND SEMINARS

Like holding meetings, offering extended programs is impossible to cover fully in one chapter. But some generalities hold pretty true. Here are some pointers to help you put a class or weekend study program together if you find yourself wanting to offer more than a meditation meeting.

A workshop is not a spontaneous event but a planned process. Production of a weekend is and should be rather extended since there are a good many factors that go into a smoothly-running workshop. The first question you want to ask yourself when contemplating a weekend study program is, "What body of material or what concept do I wish to express, discuss and study within the framework of this seminar?" This may sound simplistic. However, many a seminar has foundered on the rocks of muddled planning because, regardless of how well-produced the seminar was, the program did not have a cohesion that made it readily assimilable by the students. You need to decide just what material you want to cover. Remember that most programs are too rich rather than too poor. In an intensive workshop setting with all of the resources which a group of like-minded people represent to each other available, the amount of material that can be digested is still rather small. Any idea that needs to be manipulated by the students needs not only discussion time but also free time, free in the sense that there is nothing scheduled. You can count on your students' finding people with whom they are especially compatible and talking with them if you give them the chance and a little encouragement. A great deal of the useful work in a seminar takes place in the so-called free time.

If you have not presented this seminar before, practice your presentations. This is tremendously different from my advice to the holder of a meditation meeting, for I believe that meditation meetings need to be left largely spontaneous. One certainly cannot plan ahead what subjects will be covered and so forth unless one is in possession of an extremely accommodating contact. However, the points that seem so easily made when one is thinking out what one will say do not retain their chiseled architecture of logic when subjected to the pressures of many people looking expectantly toward you for words of enlightenment. Nothing will stand you in as good stead as honest rehearsal. If you are not satisfied with what you see when you talk to yourself in the mirror, practice again. You will find when you actually give your presentation that it is quite a bit different, probably, from what you

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have practiced at any time in the past. Nevertheless the confidence that you feel because you have practiced will be invaluable to you.

The reason seminars work so beautifully in focusing people's attention is the "birds of a feather flock together" law of common interest: mutual interests make for excellent communication. You are, in addition to presenting a certain kind of material, responsible for overseeing an environment in which that material can be best put to use during the time in which you are offering it. You have no control over where your students will go when they finish your seminar. While they are with you, however, it is well to be painstaking in your attempts to produce not only a good program but a good community environment for allowing that program to do its work. The number of details that must be attended to mitigate against setting up a workshop hurriedly. It is far better to begin early in your planning.

The first consideration is where the seminar shall be held. If you are holding it in your home, you will be involved with one set of circumstances, if in a motel or other public lodging place, you will deal with another. Assuming that a majority of people will choose to hold their seminars in a public meeting place, let's look first at the advantages and disadvantages of that arrangement. It is a great advantage to have everyone under one roof. This can happen in a home or in a hotel. It is, however, likelier to happen in a hotel since most of us do not have homes which lend themselves to accommodating sizable numbers of guests easily. In the public situation the meals are available from the hotel's restaurant and all of the details having to do with the safety needs of the people in your seminar will probably be taken care of by the management. If you have decided to have the seminar either in your own home or in a natural outdoor setting you are facing all of the production yourself, possibly with the assistance of the people in your seminar. If you are responsible for all of the details you need to start quite a bit ahead of time in nailing down your place of meeting, wherever it may be and, once it is reserved, in making quite sure that everything is laid on for the smooth running of the seminar schedule.

In a home or natural situation, shall you ask your students to cook their own food? If so, you need a carefully made schedule giving everyone his or her fair share of the work. Shall you hire a caterer? If so, you need to determine that expense and be sure that it is covered either by funds that you already have or by monies sent in by the participants in the workshop. No matter who's cooking the food, if you are responsible for the food it is a good idea for you to make out menus carefully before you go shopping. Plan simple foods but hearty ones for people are ravenously hungry at

seminars and grow extremely restive when the food is scant in supply or too fancy or different to appeal to a relatively low common denominator of taste. This is not to say that you need to plan hot dogs and hamburgers as your food. You may be a vegetarian and find such foods intolerable.

Whatever food that you plan to fix, try to keep to the middle of the road in your selections of what to fix. Think of the food not only for its basic food value but for how much enjoyment it will give in the eating of it. Details of this kind are most appreciated during a seminar. Once you have your menus made, purchase all of your groceries that can be bought ahead. There are always last-minute purchases that are necessary but the more that you do ahead of time, the less that you will have to worry about once the clock starts rolling on your seminar.

Know where you are going to hold the seminar before you advertise it for the first time. The number of students that you can accept depends very much on the adequacies of whatever place that you have chosen as the seminar setting. Don't accept extra people just because you feel sympathetic towards them and want to include everyone that wants to come to your program. There can always be a next time. Accept only the number that can be housed comfortably in the location that you have chosen. Overcrowding a seminar in order to be of more service or in order to make the seminar more lucrative is counterproductive in that an overcrowded situation makes everyone uncomfortable and diminishes the effectiveness of the seminar.

Once you have accepted the number of people that you can house, figure out how all of them are arriving. Let these people become three-dimensional to you at this point rather than having them remain names on a piece of paper. Some will be coming in by car. However, unless you live in a very large metropolitan area and have only advertised locally you will probably be meeting some airplanes in order to collect your people. Either you or someone in your organization needs to be of whatever service you can to each student as he arrives. It is usually possible to make some kind of arrangement to retrieve everybody. If you run into a snag because you are picking up too many different people at too many different places, don't worry because you are inconveniencing someone. If you were not making that person wait for you to come pick him up that same person would have to get a cab in order to come to your house. Indeed, some may wish to do that and spare both of you any inconvenience. However, it is quite normal for people to be willing to put up with a certain amount of inconvenience in order to have a few moments alone to chat with someone who is on the seminar staff, prior to meeting everyone. There is always that feeling of

butterflies in the stomach before the students meet each other and the ice gets broken.

Be sure that you have planned adequately for sleeping arrangements. Have a space on your application sheet for students' special needs. I, for instance, travel with my hot pad, a three-in-one plug and an extension cord. None of these things is a lot of help to me if there is no electricity. There are other accommodations that I make because of having arthritis and I do not think that I am much different from other people—each of us has certain special needs. Sometimes these needs are pretty important. Be sure that you have arranged not only for sleeping quarters for everyone but for the special needs of special people. If you do not have maid service you will need to run through the same process that you did with food: you will need to decide if you wish to do it yourself, hire someone to do it for you or engage all of the community of students in a clean-up routine of some kind. Whatever your decision is, be sure it is well in hand when the seminar opens. If you are scheduling students for KP and cleanup be sure that they have that information before they sign up for the seminar. Some truths are best told at once!

The creation of a good environment for seating the information that you are offering during this seminar is enhanced by certain tried and true ice-breaking methods which add to the social bonhomie of the people involved. Try to have a sing-along complete with song sheets, if necessary, at some point during any seminar regardless of how likely it would seem that music would be a great spiritual aid. It makes people feel good to sing together, especially songs that they are fond of. Get out your old Beatles song books and other "classic" rock and popular songs as well as some of the favorite spiritual tunes that you may want to share. Marshmallows or corn and potato roastings are nice accompaniment to a crackling bonfire around which the singers may sit. Almost every group has a guitarist in it so be sure to ask your students to bring their instruments with them. Parlor games such as charades are excellent, and other good icebreakers like shifting table assignments, joke-telling periods, common exercise periods and one-to-one sessions will occur to you as well as ideas which will come out of your own information and style of hospitality. Just remember that you are the head of a very real family for the length of time that the workshop is going on. Treat it lovingly. Try to avoid unfortunate legal problems even if morally you are not against a specific drug's use, by requesting that there be no drugs other than prescription drugs used on your premises. And with that parental discipline out of the way, try to let your guidance be benign and creative.

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In order to be thorough you need to have nailed down the place that you are going to use for the workshop setting four to five months ahead of time if you plan on attracting people to your seminar by advertising. Most publications close their issues to advertisers about two months before the issue is actually scheduled to be published. Since you want to have your ad out six to eight weeks ahead of the time you plan on having the workshop, even figuring conservatively, you need to be quite thorough in your deliberations. Try to keep your advertising honest. Don't exaggerate or defend what you are attempting to teach. You are only offering information. Not only is there no way to defend yourself or your opinions, each person's reality being subjectively determined, it is also unnecessary. People tend to be drawn to what will help them by a kind of inspired hunch and if you offer a workshop you will find yourself meeting people that you seem to have known all of your life. The amazing thing to me is that we do not become more and more aware of how intentional it usually is when we happen to meet people. Sometimes you meet and talk with some new person and are left wondering why you attracted that particular person and conversation. Usually there is something either to work out for the student or between you, or to celebrate as do friends who have not seen each other for a long time. That is perhaps one of the best things about seminars in general.

The care that you take with your paperwork will stand you in extremely good stead. Nothing strains relations between seminar givers and seminar students more quickly than an inadequate supply of informative paper. You should have a complete schedule for every student, not just a schedule of activities, but a breakdown of all of the time that is to be spent including free time, social time and shopping time. Literature about what the seminar is going to address is very helpful to students. If you have a speaker or speakers, offer pictures if possible, names and vitae. List the books which your students are going to need or with which it might help them to be conversant and be sure that they have that list well before they arrive at the seminar. If there is any doubt in your mind at all about the need for literature written especially for the workshop, please do go ahead and commit to paper what you wonder if you need. Many workshops are marvelously full of content but somehow more difficult to digest because there is not one keynote introduction either given by you verbally or offered by you in the form of a written introduction to your students which links each of the speakers and subjects into a common chain of reasoning or unified body with perhaps many details but one overriding theme.

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If it is possible it would be well for any seminar to have a supply of paper, pens, pencils, a typewriter and if you have one, a personal computer. Many people learn by writing their feelings down either in a journal or in the process of writing a letter to someone. That kind of creative endeavor is always to be encouraged, and if you can provide plenty of materials and a quiet place to work, your thoughtfulness will undoubtedly be appreciated. Another good resource for you to have is a comprehensive, probably hand-drawn map of the local area showing mileages to your location, where the seminar is and where everything in the community that will be needed is in relation to it. A good resource map would include the nearest grocery, drug store, cleaner, laundromat, shopping center and a nice sprinkling of churches and synagogues if you are holding the seminar over a weekend and intend to provide for those who wish to attend services. Restaurants and movies should be added if people are going to be having free meal times or are going to be responsible for their own meals, or if there will be free time enough for people to go see a movie. You will want to have a complete first aid kit on hand. If you are working out of a hotel it is most likely that details like this are covered. The same goes for smoke alarms and fire extinguishers, a good supply of candies and matches or flashlights and batteries and at least one good, portable radio in case of an emergency. You always think to yourself when you are caught without power, "I wish that I had prepared for this." The time for you to think that thought is not when you are responsible for a seminar full of students. Try to think this one ahead of time!

If you are having your seminar in a pleasant place which offers access to other kinds of recreational enjoyment like golfing, swimming, sailing, horseback riding or just looking at the scenery, you will have to make some decision about spouses, children and pets. I have a personal prejudice against including non-seminar people in seminar-rented rooms simply because the presence of the non-studying spouse or child will distract the seminar student continually.

Perhaps what makes a great seminar more than anything else is you. Know what you are there for. Ask yourself what your forte is and go with it. If you want to have a speaker besides yourself select a speaker whose point of view either compares or contrasts with yours in such a way as to tie together an overriding and unifying theme, and make the connection in your literature.

During the seminar keep remembering what you are there for. Long before the seminar's over you will have become very tired. Try not to let this disturb your focus. You need to be there all of the way. Unless you are a

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compulsive person, try to give all of your energy to the seminar during the time that you are meeting. Whatever you give, it cannot be too much, unless you have a compulsive streak. Making yourself sick with exertion cannot possibly help a seminar. But if you find your enthusiasm flagging, cast your mind back as many times as needed to the memory of just why you wanted to give the seminar.

In the end, you will need to trust your planning and the incredible gifts which your students will bring with them. If your ideas are sound and your presentation of them good, and if your agenda leaves room for inspiration to flow and for people to talk to each other, you will find that your enthusiasm begets enthusiasm in your students and your love for truth and the seeking process will be answered by the tremendous creative love your students bring to the same endeavor. What you will be creating will, in the end, no longer be your own but will be all of the participants' mutual gift to the Creator. Allow that gift to flower naturally, given the garden you have made, the seeds you have planted. Trust in your students and the learning process.