

# Group Work Practice with Australia's Asylum Seekers

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*Australia's asylum seekers have been rendered voiceless by the circumstances in which they find themselves, circumstances that include being subjected to punitive government policies, denial of basic rights and needs, economic impoverishment and social disadvantage. The Asylum Seekers Centre (ASC) in Sydney provides an individualised casework service to asylum seekers. The ASC also provides opportunities for asylum seekers to improve their circumstances through attending English classes and participating in other educational and social group programmes. The present paper is concerned with small group facilitation of mutual aid processes at the ASC. It focuses on one group programme, 'Open Forum', to illustrate a strengths-based empowerment practice. The paper concludes with some suggestions for extending group work practice with and on behalf of asylum seekers.*

*Keywords: Asylum Seekers; Group Work; Mutual Aid*

## Introduction

The *Tampa* incident in August 2001 marked a turning point in Australia's consciousness of 'asylum seekers'. Nightly television footage showed the crowded deck of the *Tampa* and detailed the progressive manoeuvres of the Australian government to block the would-be refugees from setting foot on Australian soil. Australians were polarised in their response. Some were horrified at the prospect that Australia could be swamped by floods of unwanted refugees, whereas others were shocked to witness the lack of compassion being shown by their government and fellow citizens toward so obviously traumatised people.

The media coverage of the *Tampa* incident brought the plight of asylum seekers to the attention of Australians across a wide socioeconomic spectrum and sparked the formation of many groups aimed at reversing, or at least softening, the government's harsh treatment of asylum seekers (Jupp, 2002; Haddad, 2003; Devetak, 2004;

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Moorehead, 2005). It also resulted in a deluge of offers of support to the Asylum Seekers Centre (ASC) in Sydney from people wanting to 'do something' to help asylum seekers.

### **The Asylum Seekers Centre**

The ASC is a non-government not-for-profit organisation staffed by a small core of paid employees (equivalent to five full-time positions) and a current pool of approximately 80 volunteers. The ASC commenced operation in 1993 under the auspices of the Jesuit Refugee Service. It is now sponsored by the Good Shepherd Sisters and The Mercy Foundation and is assisted by many other groups and individuals from volunteer, academic, and professional organisations.

The ASC provides case management and other services to asylum seekers who are awaiting the final determination of their application for refugee protection and who are living in the community. Volunteers at the ASC provide a wide range of services, including teaching English, catering lunches, *pro bono* professional services (e.g. medical and legal), assistance with transport, occasional emergency accommodation and social support.

The asylum seekers who visit the ASC are an extremely vulnerable population. Many have been awaiting a final determination on their applications for protection for many years. They have fled persecution and other dangers in their countries of origin and, in many cases, they have also been persecuted in countries through which they have transited on their journey to Australia. Many have experienced torture or other forms of trauma associated with organised violence or exile.

Lengthy periods of immigration detention (after arrival in Australia) have caused extreme mental stress for many of the asylum seekers who had previously coped well with the enormity of dislocation from their homes, communities and former ways of life. The harsh conditions and lack of psychiatric services in detention have also exacerbated pre-existing mental illness for some asylum seekers, making it even harder for them to survive in the community after their release.

Increasingly, it is being recognised that, as a result of their experiences, asylum seekers have a high incidence of both physical and mental health problems (Sinnerbrink *et al.*, 1996; Harris & Telfer, 2001; Smith, 2001; Steel & Silove, 2001; Kisely *et al.*, 2002). Owing to changing conditions of the visas held by many asylum seekers (e.g. the restrictions associated with Bridging Visa E), the majority of ASC clients lack Medicare and Centrelink entitlements and do not have permission to work, in either a paid or voluntary capacity. They usually have no family supports in Australia and are entirely dependent on the charity of individual community members and voluntary organisations such as the ASC.

During sabbatical leave in February–May 2005, I spent time at the ASC. I observed how naturally occurring small group processes among the asylum seekers there assisted in realising the ASC's aim of being a place of welcome for all. This paper arises from these observations and reflections on my facilitation of four sessions of

one group at the ASC known as Open Forum. Before discussing this work with Open Forum, it may help to locate it within the broader context of group work activities at the ASC and provide a rationale for group work as a method of choice when working with asylum seekers.

### *Group work at the ASC*

Group work offers opportunities unavailable in individual casework for assisting asylum seekers in their common struggle to gain some control in their lives. Working with people in groups contrasts with the dominant individualist approach of professional social work practice. Group work provides the potential for all group members to become helpers and thereby to rise above the position of dependent recipient of other people's acts of kindness.

My aim in the present paper is to describe a simple open-ended group that I worked with at the ASC and show how this group provides possibilities for client empowerment. The group meets for approximately 50 minutes once a week and provides an opportunity for all asylum seekers, volunteers, staff and visitors to the Centre to discuss issues that are of mutual interest; hence, the group's name, 'Open Forum'. Other groups in the ASC's programme include those oriented towards educational aims (e.g. learning English, computer skills) or social aims (e.g. conversation, art, music).

Group work at the ASC is a powerful method for assisting people who share a common experience: seeking asylum. Both formal and informal groups at the ASC foster a tolerance of diversity among asylum seekers and those who work with them. Asylum seekers originating from a dozen different countries sit down to lunch together and this simple act serves to break down the divisions among them, even when their home countries are traditional enemies.

The asylum seekers share many common concerns and hopes for the future. They willingly engage in collaborative processes of learning, with English teachers tapping this force to good effect in the classroom. One volunteer, an experienced professional teacher, told me of her delight to discover students who were keen to help each other to learn and her admiration for how they provided each other with high levels of emotional support. Mutual support is a common feature of programmes at the ASC and it is very evident that asylum seekers use the opportunities provided at the Centre to connect with one another and make friends.

### *Theory and practice issues in group work with asylum seekers*

One of the most salient features of work at the ASC is that the client population is multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-linguistic. A review of literature about group work with multi-ethnic populations conducted by one American author (Saino, 2003) found that articles tend to focus on groups where members are of a single ethnicity or, divided among two ethnicities, or where the ethnic differences between

the worker and the group are a feature. Articles reviewed by Saino tended to stress the benefits of homogeneity within a group, thereby serving as a mirror for the wider society where racial and cultural diversity is avoided. Saino only located a small number of articles that actually dealt with multi-ethnic groups (i.e. groups where members are from multiple ethnicities).

Saino's article is of particular interest here because it describes group work practice quite similar to that at the ASC. In both cases the work is with a truly multi-ethnic group; it is conducted in English and yet English is not the first language of the participants. Although this may seem, on the face of it, to be a recipe for failure and group breakdown, it is not necessarily so. It can also serve as a stimulus for some valuable bonding and group achievement (Saino, 2003, p. 275):

'While the members were able to share their anxieties and frustrations over expressing themselves in English, conversing in English also helped them to increase their confidence.'

However, varying English language levels can obscure conflicts or issues for and between members. The group facilitator may be 'in the dark' to a greater extent than occurs in other groups in which everyone speaks the same language, simply because members have a limited capacity to express themselves.

Saino emphasises the facilitator's role in building trust and safety in the group so that members may be supported to share their issues and concerns. She also makes the point that, although the process of working with a multi-ethnic group is difficult for the facilitator, the group members are actually quite resilient, have expertise in adapting to new situations, tend to be enthusiastic learners and can teach others (including the facilitator) a great deal about their cultures. Although Saino does not use the term, it is apparent that she is describing the concept of 'mutual aid' as it operates within her group.

### *Mutual aid*

Mutual aid is an important and overlooked theme within the group work literature. Steinberg (2002, p. 33) defines mutual aid in the following way:

'... As a social ideal it states that possibilities for helping others and being helped are limitless; as a social work ideal it states that possibilities for catalyzing such a process are limited only by lack of understanding or imagination.'

Perhaps a partial reason for overlooking the importance of mutual aid is the re-working and inclusion of this concept within the group work literature such that it becomes a taken-for-granted feature of practice with groups. Many social workers would have experienced the phenomenon of working with a group where the members help each other as much as, if not more than, the help they receive from the professional group facilitator.

Mutual aid is evident in many approaches to group work practice, including empowerment-oriented practice (Shulman, 1994, 2005) and the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2002). These approaches were the foundations of my work at the ASC. Shulman's conceptualisation of groups as forums for the enactment of mutual aid processes is empowering of group members, because it encourages them to form helping relationships with one another, rather than relying solely on assistance provided by a formal group facilitator. My social work practice, guided by a strengths perspective, is focused on discovering, embellishing, exploring and exploiting the strengths and resources of the people with whom I work. Saleebey (2002, p. 1) argues that it is through this focus on strengths and resources that the social worker can assist people '... to achieve their goals, realise their dreams and shed the irons of their own inhibitions and misgivings, and society's domination'.

Steinberg (2002, p. 33) describes mutual aid as a process of empathy, as '... subtle as a nod of recognition from a fellow group member at just the right moment'. She views all people as having a right to mutual aid processes to assist them to have a say over their own affairs and to enhance their estimation of their own capacity to not only help themselves, but also to help others. Steinberg (2002, p. 35) refers to the 'magic' of mutual aid:

'... It is always magical to discover the things about ourselves that are seen as truly helpful by others and to discover the things about others that are truly helpful to us.'

The small acts of kindness and empathy undertaken by asylum seekers at the ASC are of great significance to them because they are able to connect with each other via their common humanity. They know first-hand about the asylum-seeking experience. For them, the security and peace of mind that come from being a member of a mutually supportive group at the ASC may be in stark contrast to their daily lives. These are daily lives that are characterised by great poverty, exclusion from many of the most basic of social engagements that come with employment and many acts of hostile rejection by the broader Australian community.

Groups at the ASC provide opportunities for asylum seekers to connect with and help each other. Although Open Forum at the ASC may appear to be a simple group with limited scope for enacting mutual aid processes, it is my contention that all group structures offer valuable opportunities in which mutual aid can occur. I now move, in the next section of the paper, to a closer consideration of the Open Forum sessions in which I was involved during my time at the ASC.

### **Open Forum: Using Mutual Aid to Support Strengths-Based Empowerment Practice**

Open Forum at the ASC is held once a week on Wednesdays just before lunch; attendance is open to anyone who is at the Centre. Open Forum has been facilitated in the past by a succession of volunteers and paid staff. I facilitated Open Forum for

four sessions during March/April 2005. I also observed two other sessions of Open Forum that were facilitated by ASC staff.<sup>1</sup> Although formal ethics approval was not sought, I was granted permission by the ASC Coordinator to submit this paper for publication.

I had only visited the Centre on a few occasions before taking on the facilitation of Open Forum. In the following account of my practice, the impression could be given that what I did was well planned, well thought out and smoothly executed. This was often far from the case. My actual facilitation at the time involved much learning on the run, trial and error and constant refinement of my thinking.

Because Open Forum is open-ended, membership can change considerably from week to week as people come and go at the Centre. A total of 15 asylum seekers attended the four sessions I facilitated, but only two came to all four sessions, whereas six attended only once. The actual numbers attending each session ranged from five to 11. Languages spoken by group participants included Farsi, Arabic, Spanish, Nepalese, Korean, Mongolian, Vietnamese, Chinese (dialect unknown) and French. As noted previously, most participants did not share a common language with others, with the exception of their limited English. Other people present at these forums included a volunteer English teacher who prepared lunch while also listening in and occasionally contributing to discussions, a member of the paid staff and a high-school work-experience student who came to one session.

Open Forum has been a regular part of the ASC programme since the earliest days of the Centre. Many current and former volunteers spoke to me about how attendance at Open Forum had helped them to appreciate the range of ASC services and activities and gave them an understanding of some of the issues confronted by asylum seekers. They also spoke of Open Forum as one of the happenings at the Centre representing the coming together of people from many lands in a spirit of tolerance and mutual support.

The stated purpose of Open Forum is to give all who spend time at the ASC the opportunity to exchange information and discuss issues of common interest. It is a time for making announcements about upcoming events, changes to the various ASC programmes and services and other developments in the wider community. It can also be a place where developments in asylum-seeker policies and current news are discussed. For example, during one session, discussion of the Cornelia Rau situation was of great interest to the asylum seekers, many of whom could not understand the coverage of this in the media owing to their limited English.

Although Open Forum is not defined as being a therapeutic group, it could be expected to have considerable therapeutic value for asylum seekers. Many asylum seekers are isolated and lonely and have limited opportunities for companionship outside the Centre. Companionship has been shown to be an important healing factor for asylum seekers (Kelsey, 2004); forming friendships also allows people to join together in their own interests (Donaldson, 2004).

Yalom (1995) proposes that a number of therapeutic factors can operate within all groups and these can be seen to operate to a greater or lesser extent within Open

Forum. These therapeutic factors include the instillation of hope, universality ('all in the same boat' phenomenon), imparting of relevant and important information and altruism. Yalom (1995) also lists possible therapeutic factors as including those associated with learning about new situations and relating to others. One small example of how the Open Forum group would be useful is that it provides a safe place for asylum seekers to learn interpersonal skills for communicating in English.

A major challenge of my work with Open Forum was to balance two key considerations. The first was my desire to have a planned and purposeful approach to my practice; the second was my desire, and the group's need, to be spontaneously responsive to moment-by-moment interactions. Lang (2004) states that if the social worker remains flexible and responsive to happenings within the group, then the group itself will implement its own powerful influences on the members. This was evident to me when members of Open Forum would interrupt a pre-set agenda as circumstances required. For example, late-comers would be welcomed and introduced no matter what the group was in the midst of discussing. This was no mere indulgence: there was very little continuity of group membership from week to week, making each session rather like a single-session group. The practice of welcoming newcomers regardless of what is occurring in a group setting is also a culturally sensitive practice that can facilitate bonding, inclusion and the development of group cohesion.

I found that the best strategy was to have a simple plan that gave participants a clear sense of the purpose for each session, to ensure continuity across sessions so that attendees would know what to expect even if they had not been to Open Forum previously and to maintain a flexible permissive response to whatever interruptions occurred on the day. In view of the constantly changing membership of Open Forum from session to session, my plan also involved thinking about each meeting as being a single-session group.

It may help to expand a little here on my rationale for the single-session strategy. As the name suggests, 'single-session groups' are groups that meet only once. Although Open Forum is a weekly meeting at the ASC, its open-ended nature means that each meeting is of a new group, where some members may have been present at the previous week's meeting and others were not. Facilitating such a group requires the worker to 'tune in' to the needs of the particular population (asylum seekers), use group facilitation skills in a focused and flexible way, and manage the stages of the group's development within a tight time-frame (Shulman, 1999; Kosoff, 2003). A pitfall for workers leading single-session groups is not allowing sufficient time for the group to work through each of its development stages. More specifically, the leader needs to establish a supportive atmosphere, move into and work with the middle stage and then have enough time for a positive ending and transition (Clemens, 2004).

Facilitating Open Forum while attending to the stages of group development was a major challenge for me given the barriers to effective communication within the group. Despite the difficulties, I decided to focus on what I felt were the most

important aspects of the four stages that could be seen to operate in each meeting of Open Forum. I turn now to a summary of each of these four stages.

*Welcome, Purpose of the Meeting and Introductions*

The commencement of each meeting of Open Forum holds within it the essential message of welcome. This message has particular significance for asylum seekers because it contradicts the message of rejection contained in current government policies and in the responses to asylum seekers by many in the Australian community. I therefore chose a form of words to commence each meeting that would convey that everyone in attendance was welcome.

I then provided a simple explanation of the purpose of the meeting. This needed to be done at the beginning of every meeting because some participants had not attended Open Forum previously. I also realised that there was value in reminding everyone present that this is a meeting that encourages freedom of speech. This may have been an unfamiliar idea to some asylum seekers who had little or no experience, in their countries of origin, of exercising a right to speak freely in public.

I was careful to explain the purpose of Open forum, as I understood it, because I felt such an explanation would help to lower the usual anxiety that exists for members at the beginning stage of a group. Additional anxiety may have existed for the asylum seekers owing to the fact that I was a new person at the Centre and had little prior contact with any of them.

After outlining the purpose of Open Forum generally and the agenda for the day's meeting specifically, my next task was to initiate introductions. I repeated each person's name to get the pronunciation right and used the whiteboard to ensure correct spelling. This repetition and recording also helped everyone to remember the names of those present. I was sensitive to possible concerns asylum seekers may have about publicly stating their names and thereby disclosing their identity. What was important here was that I was not taking an official record of correct names but, rather, that everyone had choice about the name by which they preferred to be known within the context of this group and that I would take care to do as they wished in this regard. Sometimes I invited participants to talk to each other in pairs for a couple of minutes and then introduce their partner to the whole group. This helped them to connect with one other person to gain support before speaking up in the large group.

The introductions section of each Open Forum meeting was crucially important in that each asylum seeker's right to individuality was respected through the simple act of using their preferred names. Bauman (1997, p. 33) sees such simple actions as central to the 're-empowerment of strangers'. The asylum seekers were strangers to me at the beginning of Open Forum and my focus on learning and using their names was an essential step for me to build a relationship of trust with them.

I aimed to use the beginning stage of each meeting to lower participants' anxiety by ensuring that everyone knew what to expect as the meeting unfolded. This first stage

required a larger allocation of meeting time than would be the case for less culturally and linguistically diverse groups.

### *Open Discussion*

In the second stage of the meeting, I aimed to open up discussion on matters relevant to the Centre and the lives of the asylum seekers. Sometimes discussion topics were my choice, but I also encouraged participants to raise topics of their own. A common theme was related to the ASC weekly programme: which parts of it were asylum seekers finding useful, which less so and ideas for changes.

I initiated discussion in a number of ways depending on who was present, their level of English proficiency, recent events in the Centre and in the broader community. For example, one meeting occurred after a Centre picnic day. I started the conversation by asking the simple open-ended question, 'What did you like most about the picnic?' Those who had not been present were told by the others about the various aspects of the picnic, including the food, the games and the weather, and this led to some exchange of information about 'free' public spaces in Sydney, such as the Botanical Gardens and Centennial Park, and also about how to get to these locations using public transport. One of the asylum seekers was puzzled about how public parklands came to exist and this led to a discussion about public facilities being funded through the taxation system.

Discussion topics would sometimes arise in unexpected ways. For example, in response to my question, 'What would you like to discuss today?', one asylum seeker asked for help in getting his spectacles fixed. He had spoken to one of the caseworkers about this and was frustrated that he had been waiting for some time for the repairs to be organised. I commented on how frustrating it can sometimes be when you are waiting for someone else to do something that is important to you. The following group discussion focused on common experiences of waiting for the determination of their refugee status and their frustrations arising from having to depend on charity and being denied incomes of their own. We also talked about the procedure for making a complaint about services at the Centre.

During this second stage of Open Forum, mutual aid processes occurred as asylum seekers shared with each other their common experiences and strategies for problem solving and coping. The focus on issues of mutual concern helped build a sense of community within the group of asylum seekers at the ASC and bridge the gulf of their cultural and linguistic diversity.

### *Announcements and Information Exchange*

The third stage of Open Forum was largely devoted to announcements about events at the Centre and about other services (e.g. English classes available through other organisations). I made a point of following up my announcements with an invitation for the participants to make announcements of their own. My aim was to encourage

them to actively share information among themselves rather than remaining as passive recipients.

In practice, there was often a back and forth movement between the third and second stages of the meeting. For example, an attempt by me during the second stage to initiate group discussion might fall quite flat but then, when I moved on to making announcements about upcoming events, this information could trigger some lively group discussion.

### *Closure*

My main task during the fourth and final stage of each Open Forum was to bring the group to an orderly and timely close. This stage was usually fairly brief and, in most cases, I began the process of closure with an announcement that Open Forum was about to finish. I then summarised any issues of concern that had been discussed and any decisions that had been made for follow-up action. I was careful to reinforce at this time any positive interactions that had occurred during the group meeting. This focus on positive interactions near the end of a single-session group can encourage individual group members to connect further with one another outside the group (Kosoff, 2003). Finally, I concluded the meeting by reminding members of the next Open Forum, thanking everyone for participating and issuing an invitation to lunch.

This final stage could easily slip into being a 'taken-for-granted' and unexamined practice. However, as I reflected each week on my experience of facilitating Open Forum, I found that it was often this final stage that would indicate for me what I needed to attend to differently in the next meeting. For example, when I experienced the end stage of one session as being rushed and emotionally flat, it was a signal that I needed to manage time more effectively and encourage more interactions between asylum seekers during the meeting.

### **Extending Group Work with and on Behalf of Asylum Seekers**

Group work has long been seen as a core social work method and yet it receives significantly less attention than other methods in the social work literature (Brown, 1997). This limited focus on group work is unfortunate, given the capacity of groups to unleash powerfully therapeutic forces of mutual aid and self-empowerment.

The group work method provides social workers and other helping professionals with a way of engaging asylum seekers in collaborative efforts to help themselves. Group work can directly challenge a 'top-down' approach to practice (Ife, 1997) that privileges the knowledge of the professional over that held by clients. Such a challenge seems nowhere more needed than when the clients in question are asylum seekers. Another important challenge offered by group work is to the dominant individualist approach to service delivery. When applied to asylum seekers, this approach can serve to isolate them from one another and entrench a view of their personal troubles as being disconnected from political and social realities.

Numerous possibilities exist for extending group work practice with asylum seekers. Despite the communication difficulties in working with a multi-cultural and multi-linguistic population, asylum seekers can readily be engaged in self-help projects. Examples already in operation at the ASC include learning English, learning job-related skills and participating in social activities. Other therapeutic programmes could be developed to address the various legacies of asylum-seeking experience, such as the stress arising from previous torture and trauma.

Work with asylum seekers should not be limited to situations in which they are constructed as clients in need of professional services. Including asylum seekers in mainstream community groups and activities is a practice that contrasts markedly with the exclusionary practices of the current government. Churches and TAFE colleges are providing examples of how asylum seekers can be included as equal members in local congregations and educational programmes.

In addition, asylum seekers should be considered for leadership roles, such as group facilitator, educator and consultant, in programmes on asylum-seeker issues. They could be involved in these capacities in community education programmes, political lobbying and activism. Although many asylum seekers have informally taken on such leadership roles, there are significant structural barriers to their being able to do so in more formal ways. A major limitation would seem to be the actual state of impoverishment in which most asylum seekers find themselves; another, is the constraints imposed by visa conditions, often including an embargo on work both of a paid and voluntary nature. For many organisations, the ASC included, elevating asylum seekers to higher status roles requires significant shifts in the way that services are planned, developed and resourced over time. Positive discrimination recruitment strategies, in favour of those who have been asylum seekers, could be one way of elevating the position of individual asylum seekers.

Apart from group work with asylum seekers themselves, the group work method is also of great relevance in work about asylum seekers. For example, training and supervision groups for staff and volunteers provide valuable opportunities to challenge individualistic and paternalistic approaches to practice with asylum seekers. Such groups can use experiential learning exercises (e.g. role-plays based on asylum seeker scenarios) to develop practice skills and enhance a capacity for empathy. These groups can also be used to foster a culture among workers of interdependence and mutual support and, most importantly, a strengths-based orientation towards asylum seekers.

## **Conclusion**

The ASC provides services to some of the most socially marginalised and disadvantaged people in Australia today; people who have often experienced great trauma both in their countries of origin and while in Immigration detention in Australia. Social workers, given the profession's commitment to social justice, have roles to play in protesting against harsh and punitive government policies, advocating

for fairer treatment for asylum seekers and supporting the work of the non-government agencies (such as the ASC) that currently provide the bulk of services to asylum seekers.

This paper has presented a practice example of group work with asylum seekers at the ASC. The single-session group, Open Forum, provided opportunities for asylum seekers to engage in mutual aid. Mutual aid is central to effective group work with any population. In the case of asylum seekers, mutual aid is particularly significant. It provides a means for them to escape from passivity and dependence on others and to engage in self-help and altruism.

In many ways, Open Forum stands in stark contrast with groups I have previously worked with. I had never previously facilitated a group in which the members were so united in their common experiences of threats to life, freedom and human dignity. Many would have experienced, at first hand, the horrors of war and the tortures of brutal regimes. All had suffered extremes of loss; loss of country, culture, language, home, intimate relationships, possessions, status and role. In the face of such deprivations, these people exhibited a kind of resilience, serenity and generosity of spirit that I found inspiring. They helped me to more fully appreciate the mutuality component of mutual aid. In the face of major religious, cultural, ethnic and language differences, they took obvious pleasure in one another's company and in helping one another. In addition, they exhibited great tolerance and patience towards me in my efforts to understand their situations.

## Note

- [1] I acknowledge here the contributions that ASC staff and volunteers have made to my work. In particular, I thank Tamara Domicelj and Fiona Keast for sharing their practice and ideas about Open Forum.

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