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DUKE UNIVERSITY

DURHAM, NORTH CAROLINA

The Search for Meaning

Every week, the Self Knowledge Symposium pushes toward a closer understanding of life

On Tuesday nights, members of the Self Knowledge Symposium fill a small, nondescript space in the Old Chemistry Building with energetic chatter. As they patiently await the commencement of their weekly meeting, participants mill around the motley assortment of chairs, spontaneously engaging each other in discussions about topics raised in previous meetings or readings.

By 7:30 p.m., the room is filled to capacity as more than 30 people situate themselves about the room, many passing up empty chairs to sit cross-legged on the floor. Members of the group range from freshmen to graduate students with both first time participants and seasoned veterans. Looking around the room, it is easy to see that these people—who

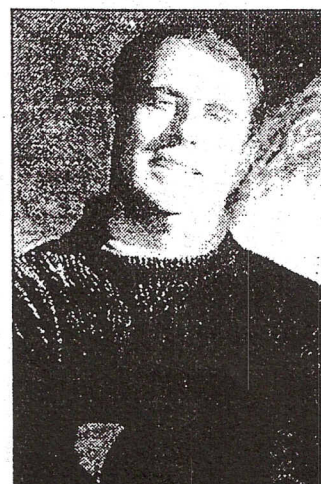
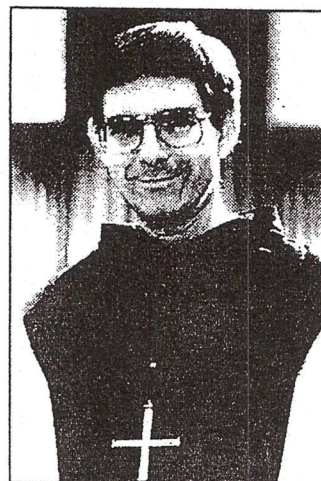
By **KATHERINE STROUP**
Chronicle staff writer

share jokes and secrets easier than many families—have formed a truly unique community.

Through its meetings, activities and special speakers, the non-denominational organization works to awaken students on three levels: the physical, or the need for a well-developed and intimate community; the psychological, on which members attempt to understand themselves better through intense self-evaluation, and the spiritual, or the quest for some truth greater than the individual.

As the meeting last Tuesday began, announcements filled the opening minutes, mostly concerning last minute preparations for this

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The Self Knowledge Symposium, which hosts speakers such as Francis Kline(top), was begun 10 years ago by August Turak.

OVER



Students look to meetings for personal challenges, fulfillment

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evening's Spiritual Bach organ recital, a rare appearance by Father Francis Kline, a child organ prodigy who, at the age of 23, decided to enter the monastery and take a vow of semi-silence.

The members of SKS worked diligently to advertise the event, despite the skepticism of some who thought it would be impossible to fill the Chapel's more than 1,600 seats. Trinity junior Meredith Parker, SKS president for the past two years, announced, however, that Page Box Office had called frantically Tuesday wondering what to do if the recital sold out.

"Suddenly, this monk that nobody has heard of is drawing 1,650 people to the Chapel," said James Todd, director of on-campus publicity for SKS. "This success is, to a large extent, because of community, because of the fact that people are willing to work for a group without getting any personal benefit."

Many of the members of the group were equally impressed by the sellout.

"What I learned from [publicizing] the concert is that small groups of committed people can create a miracle," said Trinity senior Doug Friedlander, who has been involved in SKS since its founding in 1994.

August Turak, who founded SKS 10 years ago and is moderator of its weekly meetings, began his quest for enlightenment as a college student.

"I discovered that I had questions, very serious questions that would not leave me alone," he explained, "and so I got very interested in Eastern Religions."

Through this interest, Turak—known as Augie to the group—became a student of Zen master Richard Rose. After five years with Rose, Turak decided to enter the busi-

ness world. He was vice president of a software retail company and was involved with the founding of MTV. Despite his success, Turak was not satisfied with his life.

"When I was alone in the business world, I was starving spiritually."

In an attempt to end that spiritual deprivation, Turak founded the Self Knowledge Symposium at North Carolina Central University. The organization at NCCU later formed a sister group at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and in 1994, William Willimon, dean of the Chapel, suggested that a Duke chapter be formed. Willimon is now the group's official advisor.

Turak, who is now the owner of two multi-million dollar firms, enjoys interacting with college students.

"As you get older, you get bills, you get kids and you don't have time," Turak said. "College is a critical time in your life because a lot of these questions are clearest and you have time to act upon them."

Action is a fundamental goal of SKS. Last week the members wrote one sentence explaining how they hoped to change because of their involvement in the group. Speaking in soft voices and using only first names, each member shared their vision of personal enlightenment.

"I hope the group will keep me in line... wake me up... connect me to other people," answered participants. Their responses shared one common thread—the hope that the group would unsettle them and shake them out of the complacency so often criticized in college students.

Although the basic focus of the group remains the same, the spirit of SKS varies greatly from year to year and even between semesters.

"The group has taken on many forms... it has been intellectual, been confrontational, been emotional and been philosophical," Friedlander explained.

One facet of SKS that does remain constant is the commitment expected of its members. Dedication to the symposium is the rule, not the exception. Students are expected to work to help the organization achieve its goals, whether by selling 20 tickets to the Spiritual Bach or by waking up at 7:30 a.m. to post fliers all around East Campus.

"The meetings are mostly about inspiration," said Trinity junior Rob Nikander. "The challenge is to work, to live that same life all week long."

Turak himself balances a busy schedule with the meetings he moderates practically every night on different area campuses, and the late-night phone calls he receives from his students who feel the sudden need to talk.

"The only good thing is that I'm not married," Turak chuckled.

This work ethic also extends to the group's weekly readings and assignments. Last week's assignment, for example, was to write a one-page essay describing yourself without the use of any physical characteristics.

"Who doesn't have an essay?" Turak asked quietly. Several members sheepishly raised their hands. "Well how about taking off then," he said shortly, his voice quickly gaining volume. "Come back when you have it done."

This dynamic is replayed several times during the meeting. Though the group is supportive, it has little patience with students who fail to make the necessary commitment, in terms of both phys-

ical and intellectual energy.

Members make the commitment because of the group's promise of community. "The most compelling draw is intimacy," Turak postulated.

Parker first learned about SKS as a freshman working on Project BUILD.

"Ever since I've been at Duke, I've been at the Self Knowledge Symposium," she said. "It was what I thought college should be like. What I was looking for, I found at SKS."

Friedlander also explained the unique community of SKS. "It's the only game in town. It's the most serious, the most genuine thing at Duke."

As those who forgot to write their essays quickly learned, however, the sense of community does not preclude criticism.

"We're a safe place to let down and talk about what's on their minds and much, much deeper, more personal, stuff. But it's not some type of sensitivity session," Turak said.

One member, who wished to remain anonymous, said that the intense criticism can go too far. "I like the sense of community," he said, "but I think Augie is too forceful, too critical sometimes."

Friedlander, however, felt the use of criticism was necessary to achieving the group's mission. "Confrontation shakes you up in such a way that you must see the things that you have attempted to avoid... no one wakes up to a subtle alarm."

Turak said that complete honesty, although sometimes painful, is what makes intimacy possible.

"It's hard work, scary work, joyful work," Turak summarized. "SKS is about transformation. It's experimental, putting yourself on the line and taking some risks."