

"BROKEN FEELINGS"

Psychodrama as Couples Therapy

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Fresh out of my internship I began a professional career in psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapy, but let it go in favor of group, couples, and family therapy. A decade later I came to focus on psychodrama, especially within institutional settings. In private practice with couples, I'd begin with individual screening, and continuing with assigning each to open ongoing separate psychodrama groups. When they were ready I'd treat them together as a couple, or process them through my couples-only group for a set number of sessions. This facilitated closure. But client needs change, and I continued with a few individuals over the long haul, or referred them to another therapist.

When working from within hospital institutions, I bypassed initial screening--- records were available, but I didn't read them before forming my own opinion. Then I inserted the mandated diagnosis and a brief treatment plan, which I hardly ever referred to till my work was complete. Then I wrote, a short termination summary. In contrast, my ongoing entries to the medical records were detailed processing accounts, from which I've selected a young woman's two psychodramas, a week apart, that in your following just what happens you may see for yourself the progress taking place.

I've abbreviated these slightly and deleted tell-tale clues to identification. Otherwise they are very much as they were when I entered them into the record. Psychodrama is both a method and a collection of techniques. The techniques have been widely appropriated by the healing professions. You may already be using some of them regularly. To introduce you to the method, I haven't the space for adequate discussion, but offer this example instead.

Please put your quest for "the truth" on hold in favor of venturing into the protagonist's story, suspending disbelief as you do with movies or novels, for the "as-if" posture more quickly leads to the end you seek. Our policy is to validate the protagonist's perception even when we see, on the face of it, that everyone else who was there would hardly agree. When the protagonist no longer needs to defend his story, our acceptance frees him to qualify and modify, and almost imperceptibly alter the picture. We trace out the implications of the modified version in action. What is amiss stands out in bold relief and the protagonist demonstrates how he's attempted to deal with the situation previously.

The director determines whether to respond with a 'band-aid' role training on the interpersonal level, or whether to plunge into exploration on the intrapsychic level, toward making fundamental change there. This is what we present below. As closure we tryout both unlikely and likely interpersonal futures, to the protagonist's satisfaction. Finally the audience shares with the protagonist what in their lives resembles the story he's shown them. Their wholehearted acceptance prepares him for the *off-stage* re-entry to world outside the theater and outside the institution.

Our language consists almost entirely of ordinary theater English, with these three exceptions:

The role of the DOUBLE: One sits or stands beside the protagonist, acting as if he were inside him, bringing out feelings on the fringe of awareness, with a view to maximizing outer expression.

The role of the AUXILIARY: One represents persons from the protagonist's world, living or dead, fantasy-figures, voices, supernatural beings, or pets and inanimate objects, given the power to speak.

ROLE REVERSAL: The process of moving back and forth, as between chairs, to present responses the protagonist expects, providing information the auxiliary needs in playing the role of the other.

Inasmuch as members of the staff were often present with the inmates at psychodrama, I've used these words without explanation for all those entitled to the medical records. Indeed, openness was the rule. A patient's psychiatrist often read to his patient excerpts of what I'd put on record, which came as no great surprise to the patient, who may have already requested and seen what I said beforehand. My policy, never to say anything I couldn't say to one's face.

The therapeutic theater creates a convincing context for involving the whole body, intensifying emotional investment. We review the past, explore the present, and rehearse the future. Abundant, peer support represents an ideal community. With limited contact, we can safely do more in less time.

Losing Her Mother

Nan, at age 24, came to psychodrama today expecting to be protagonist. The group lined up behind her over the other two possible. She was ready to deal with the loss of her mother when she was five. I interviewed the protagonist as if she were her mother when mother was 27, her age at her death. She was a thin blond who wore a perpetual smile. They had been married 6 years and had 3 children. Nan was the middle child between sisters. Mother worked in a fireworks factory, but had cancer the last 3 years of her life. A month before she died mother sent Nan to relatives, and went into the hospital.

1) We went to the last time Nan saw her mother alive. Mother wrote Nan a letter. With Nan in the role reversed position as mother, we had 'mother' speak the letter to her daughter. (In reality mother handed the letter to little Nan, so that she could read it later). Mother said, *"I'm going away, and I can't come back. I'm upset that I can't do things with you anymore. I want you to know that I'm sick and that I love you. I've written this for you to have something to remember me by."* Then they brought in one child after the other till mother had seen them all. Today I gave Nan the chance to say, as if she were still five, whatever she'd felt at the time but had been unable to express, and finally I conferred upon her present wisdom, despite her youth then. So Nan pleaded, *"I need you. Don't leave me. Can't you come back for the holidays? I know you have no choice. If you did you'd never have left. I love you very much."*

2) Nan mentioned in passing how she'd acted at the funeral home, pulling off flower petals. In an imaginary scene I brought mother back from the dead, so that Nan could say how she felt about that now. *"I'm sorry for the childish way I acted. I tried to be happy."* 'Mother' replied: *"You were a child; you didn't know what was going on."* Nan said, *"Don't hate me. I wanted to be the perfect child for you. Was I?"* Mother said, *"You were."* They held one another for a long time amidst a flood of tears.

3) Nan brought mother up-to-date. Two months after mother died, Dad remarried, and let stepmother throw her out onto the street when she was eleven, where she was brutally beaten up and left almost unrecognizable in the hospital. Nan screamed at mother, *"Where were you when I needed you?"*

4) Nan chose three chairs, into each of which she placed a person to represent important relationships in her life. So Nan showed her mother how things stand with them, addressing them one at a time. We began with stepmother: *"You beat me with that leather belt till I bled, but I never let you see me cry. There is no pain you could suffer that would bother me a bit. I'd like to see you suffer."*

I role reversed Nan with her mother, so that 'mother' could react to stepmother too. *"How dare you ever put your hands on my child! She was a good kid, tender, precious, kind. If I were on earth you'd be dead."*

I reversed Nan into the role of the stepmother to have her say whatever would be helpful. 'Stepmother' said, *"Take me to the hospital. I'm having a heart attack."* to which Nan responded, *"Die!"* The group laughed. Nan was entitled to her anger.

5) Next came the father chair. Nan said, *"You were always there for me when I was little. Then when Mom died you turned to the bottle. You watched step mom beat me. I even overdosed, leaving a trail of pills to my room where you'd find me. But you said I'd sleep it off."*

In the role of mother speaking to dad, 'mother' said, *"I left you with the responsibility for my kids. You brought a stranger into my home. I left you my heart and soul on my deathbed. You screwed up these kids for the rest of their lives, especially in kicking Nan out when she was eleven. I could care less about your living or dying."*

Then Nan reversed into dad's role, speaking as dad would, *"I did the best I could. Don't you think you deserved some of those punishments?"*

Here's what she'd like dad to say: *"You're right. I heard you crying. I'm sorry. I should've protected you."*

Nan as herself told father: *"You told me you couldn't tell me if you had loved my mom. For years I tried to work things out between us. You should be a man, but you're not. You're a wimp. Stay out of my life."*

6) Next we focused on Nan's husband. She told her mother: *"I have a great husband and baby. I know you must've been watching over me when I found Bill."*

'Mother' turned to Bill: *"There hasn't been a blessing in her life more wonderful than you. I'm so happy you were there for her. Thank you for supporting her, so that she can smile again."*

I role reversed Nan into the Bill position, so that 'Bill' could address mom: *"Nan's a good person. I'm helping her the best way I can. We can work through this."*

Then 'he' turned to Nan: *"I'm here all the way. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you. I love you. I've felt your*

pain. *I can't wait for you to come home.*" All three hug.

7) I asked Nan what still bothers her. *"I want to yell at my mom for not being here for me,"* she answered. So to mother Nan said: *"I know this is childish, but I'm mad that you left. You weren't there for me, but I know you couldn't help it. I want you back so bad. I wanted you to be there for my baby's birth, her christening, and very holiday. I'm sorry I'm mad at you, but I miss you."*

'Mom:' *"I understand. Don't feel guilty."* They embraced.

8) Nan asked for a scene to apologize to her husband and her daughter. We met three year old Sue, her daughter. Sue said, "Grandma takes care of me while you're gone. I look more like dad than mom."

Mother said she was *"a very smart little girl."* Nan told Bill he was a big part of her recovery, and she thanked him. Nan told Sue, "I'll never leave you again. I'm sorry I was mad at you and acted like a monster. My feelings were broken, but they're getting better." Back in Sue's role, 'Sue' said to the auxiliary representing Nan, *"Then why were you mean to me? Why did you call me stupid?"*

Back in her own role Nan replied: *"I'm sorry for that. That's why I went to the hospital, but I'm getting better. My baby will never shed another tear over me."* Dad chimed in. The family embraced.

9) We concluded with an intrapsychic scene. Nan chose a double and told the double how she felt about Nan, how she despised her. She wasn't very smart, nor very pretty, not a lot of good things. With Nan reversed back into the self represented by her double, listening to the criticisms, I asked her how old she was. Taken by surprise, she said 24.

I pointed to the critical part of herself (where the double now sat) and I said, *"She's 24 over there, but how old are you over here?"* She understood and said '12.' So at 12 she responded. *"You're right. Sometimes I'm not those things, sometimes I am. Don't say mean things to me. I need you to mother me. I need love, compassion, sharing, time to do stuff for myself, time to be me. I want to see the sky and say it's pretty."*

The 24 year old part said, "I want these things for you, so don't blow it.

The 12 year old said, *"Love me, be patient with me and I will be these things. "*

Nan dropped out of role for a moment, afraid that it might be too late. *"Not if you take care of your 12 year old, accepting her as she is, and loving her anyway"*. I said, calling for a hug, which they did, with more tears. At one point I asked the group if they thought Nan deserved the kind of mothering the 12 year old longed for and the group was unanimous in their support. Sharing was enthusiastic. Most of the audience had been near tears throughout the psychodrama. Nan had arrived at a good place.

"Good Enough Mothering"

Two weeks later Nan described herself as "drained and directed." By 'directed' she had reference to her wearing blinders like a horse. As protagonist she'd talk with father and stepmother, telling them what she's done at the hospital, how she has been working through the pain they brought her. A bird colliding with a high window caught her attention. I had the impression she felt she was something like that bird. The group agreed to her being protagonist.

1) We began with the blinders metaphor. I set up a corridor of chairs to represent the blinders, with Nan at one end, had her look down the corridor, to see what was at the other end. She knelt down to put the blinders at eye level, and said she couldn't see very clearly, but she characterized it as a happy place like a gateway to a Six Flags amusement park. Over at the far end are hopes and dreams, which drew her forward, but only with very little steps, as if hobbled with a rope. Simultaneously she sensed being pushed from behind. Dreams and hopes were personified as husband and daughter at the far end of the corridor, longing for her return. She felt frustrated and guilty not to be at home. Her self-confidence low she said I can't promise what I'll be when I return. No guarantees. If she ran down the corridor, she imagined ending up like a bird hitting the high window.

2) She'd come up against a wall. The director 'concretized' the wall with a row of chairs between her and the audience. He had her role reverse with this wall, giving the wall a voice, which said that behind the wall lay fear, pain, heartache, and shame.

The wall is made of brick and concrete, taller than Nan. As the wall she said, *"I'm very strong. Nan tries to get around me but she can't. I protect her, but she's trying to knock me down. I'm her friend. I've been here so long. And now she just wants to put me aside. I won't let her."*

Back in her own role, Nan said to the wall: *"I'm afraid to go home. You need to go away so that I can show*

my emotions. *I can't look big and strong, because I'm not.*" The 'wall' replied, *"I'm not going anywhere. Nan said, "I don't want you to be so big."*

The director explained that the wall was there to protect her. (The wall is the counter-script) The wall said, *"What can I do then, to help you?"*

Nan said, *"Sue is the most important thing in the world to me, but I can't spend more than five hours with her"* (without risking losing it). Nan complained to the wall: *"You get in my way. I need to be myself with my family. I need you to go away."* But she negotiates. *"Maybe you could put small things behind you, but not so large that you get in the way with what matters to me the most."*

3) The director had Nan take the role of her daughter Sue. We learned that three year old Sue likes to 'drive' her pink convertible. *"Mommy's in the hospital because her feelings are broken,"* Sue explained in answer to my question.

Nan chose an auxiliary to represent her daughter, and addressed her, saying *"You know that I'm here for you. I want you to come to me. I've been mean to you, but I don't want to do that again. I'm not perfect."*

The auxiliary as little Sue replied, *"I'm glad you're not perfect. If you were, I'd have to be perfect too."*

Mother Nan continued: *"I want to be there for you, but sometimes I don't like you."*

Quickly I reversed Nan into Sue's role, asking little Sue to tell Nan whether she understood. Sue replied: *"I understand you try. I don't want everything, just your love. Grandma told me you didn't buy me at K-Mart, and you don't have a receipt. I'm a gift from God."* The comment overwhelmed Nan (and me!).

4) I asked Nan when she'd felt like that. She remembered that when she was in the seventh grade she'd come home from school sick. She wore ragged jeans and tee shirt. Her stepmother challenged her right to be home, and refused to believe her when she protested: *"I'm really sick."*

Stepmother said to Nan's father, *"Why don't you do something with her?"* She screamed at little Nan, *"You don't do what you're supposed to. I ought to smack you."* Nan cowered. *"Can I please go to the doctor?"* "No!" stepmother bit back at her; *"You were there just the other day."* Out of role, Nan commented to the director, *"I'd be on the floor."* "And afterwards?" I asked:

"I'd be in my room praying and crying, 'Why does she do this to me?' All I want is for her to love me. I didn't think that God loved me then, but I do now, because He gave me my husband and our daughter."

5) I brought her back into a scene modified by Nan's present wisdom and the ability to speak her mind to stepmother without fear of reprisal. *"I hate you sooo much,"* she said. "Like Johnny Carson," I asked, *"Just how much do you hate her?"* Nan rose to the occasion. *"I'd tie her to an airplane landing strip, and have a 747 land on her face. And I'd do it to Dad too! I didn't want to call her Mom",* Nan said, *"She made me."*

6) Nan addressed an auxiliary representing her father. *"You hurt me more than she did, but not in the same way. I've learned something here. You needed somebody and she was the first to come along. You fulfilled your need. And I got beat up, for no reason."* 'Father' asked: *"Was I supposed to step in?"* "Yes!" Nan screamed. *"You were never there for me. You never protected me."*

Staging is vital here. Auxiliaries representing mother and father were seated next to each other in these last two scenes. We brought up empty chairs to the far side of each, and called upon the auxiliary who represented little Nan to sit next to the stepmother, and the auxiliary who represented the husband to sit next to Nan's father. We directed Nan's attention to the main males in her life and the main females in her life, and raised the question as to whether she ever confused them. Instantly she saw what we were driving at, that sometimes her feelings toward the stepmother spilled over onto Sue, and sometimes feelings toward her father spilled onto her husband.

7) We went to an intrapsychic scene where she confronted herself in the form of her double sitting opposite. *"I can't believe you did such stupid stuff,"* she said, referring to outbursts at home, which brought her to the hospital. She and the double reversed roles. Where the double had been, she said: *"When*

I did that, I was so alone. Today's Nan wasn't there for me. I needed to be strong. I don't need your punishment. I need your love. You're so stupid!" The critical Nan persisted. *"I'm stupid when you're not with me",* she replied (illustrating a major thesis of this paper). Again the critic condemned: *"Why can't you make a decision on your own?"* As prompted, Nan in the role of the double replied: (again supporting our thesis) *"I need all of me. I need you too. I want to be a strong person, and the one sitting over there is strong".* "But so harsh," I commented. Nan stood up to the critic: *"You did some bad things, but you came to the hospital for help. By myself I'm helpless. You need to be there for me. OK, I'll help,* that side of herself agreed, *"but*

how? Remember who you're really angry with." Nan referred to the three chairs of a previous scene, and then added, "Sometimes I forget." The other said, *I'll remind you. I need you to take care of this child inside you. Don't criticize so much. I hear your negatives. Why don't I hear your positives?*" Thus our focus on negatives and positives.

The auxiliary replied, *"Let down the wall."* Nan responded: *"I've tried. You don't hear me but I hear you"*. I re-defined the extremes of Nan as the contrast between 'grown-up Nan' and 'the little girl inside you.' Then I reminded her of her feelings toward Sue, saying that the little girl inside needed quite as much and deserved no less. At last grown-up Nan said to the girl inside: *"As you grow older I'll make sure you know that you're special. Can you understand what you've got? You got it so good"*. The double replied. *"I need you to tell me."* So she did. They celebrated their union with a hug, and we cut the scene.

I interpreted that one additional (to stepmother) possible basis for some of the negative feeling toward the three year old may have been the contrast between life for the three year old and life as it had been for Nan when she was growing up! Of course the little girl would seem uncooperative and unappreciative, and Nan growing up would've been delighted to have it half as good as she, but little Sue had no way to know that. Fortunately for her, the world hadn't been as bad to her as it had been for her mother. We brought Sue back to the stage for her mother to say whatever she wanted to say to her. Nan said, "I'm sorry. I expect too much of a three year old." The double in role as the inner child said, *"I love you. You're pretty."* Nan declared, *"I love you, too,"* viewing the two side-by-side together.

8) We returned to the initial stage setting with its corridor of blinders. As Nan produced them in action, she named them as stepmother and father, and identified each, respectively, as *"what I don't want to be to Sue and what I don't want to be to Bill."* She agreed she should cut herself some slack, and be more gentle with herself. Her peers shared well with her, and she seemed relieved.

A Personal Note

I'll never forget the things Nan said. They touched my heart. Think of protagonist comments like these, and summon up the context when you become discouraged with the course of your work, as we all do from time to time when we're deeply invested in our work. Note that most of them came as she took the role of the child-self. Here is spontaneity and creativity personified.

- * *I want to look at the sky and say it's pretty.*
- * *Mother is in the hospital because her feelings are broken.*
- * *Take the expression of anger. He should be put in a pond full of piranhas. Let a 747 land on his nose. (Sounds like Johnny Carson in one of his favorite roles, doesn't it?)*
- * *How about the image of a horse with blinders, which we were able to concretize.*
- * *Mom was overwhelmed, and so was I when she declared I'm a gift from God.*

Adapting to the One-to-one Therapeutic Relationship

The better way is to bring in another person. With the protagonist's permission, maybe a "stranger" from the waiting room, or the receptionist, or the peer waiting for her friend to finish, or someone she trusts and brings along for the purpose of being on call as needed. If your spouse is handy, that may be a very good choice. Or perhaps a colleague at the same facility whose client has cancelled? The remaining option is for you to take the auxiliary or doubling role yourself. The doubling part is fairly easy, if you set up a convention of standing beside the protagonist to mirror his posture, speak, and then return to your usual chair. You can 'underscore' which is a kind of doubling by echoing something the protagonist has said, without ever leaving your chair. You may take an auxiliary role by explaining what you want to do and announcing when you've done it.