

Reflections on Oman's Theology for Psychodrama

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We normally think of psychodrama as a therapeutic discipline more aligned to scientific reasoning than religion. And, when combined with Hitchcockian images of “Psycho,” it may be a bit off-putting to church-goers and the religiously minded. But Methodist minister and theologian, John B. Oman, was a regular participant in psychodrama or what he called, “The Theater of Reconciliation,” at the Wesley United Methodist Church in Minneapolis. This involvement brought him round to develop a “Theology for Psychodrama” which was presented in memory of Jacob L. Moreno, the founder of psychodrama, in the 1974 edition of the *Journal of the American Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama* called, *Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama*. Here I would like to recap and fill out his ideas for church groups interested in using action methods for reconciliation in church life and beyond.

Oman begins by describing a typical psychodrama at the “Theater of Reconciliation” in Minneapolis—the three level stage, floodlights for mood, the participating audience. He describes the first part of the drama, the “warmup,” where the development of a common theme and the emergence of a protagonist occur. Then the second stage, “action,” where the protagonist introduces a situation in his/her life to be dealt with. Simple props are brought in and action begins. Past, present and future scenes are all acted out in the here and now. When the drama reaches a conclusion, the director moves the group into the third part and “sharing” begins. Everyone shares, without any criticism, the feelings the drama has evoked in them. They experience a catharsis and support the protagonist—he/she is not alone.

Oman rhetorically asks why the venue is called “The Theater of Reconciliation,” and answers by summing up his thesis that the Theology for Psychodrama is based on the Doctrine of Reconciliation (Oman 1974: 48). “It is a Theology of Relationship.” In Oman’s view, then, following the theme of reconciliation, the Theology for Psychodrama is basically a Theology of Relationship (1974: 48). He begins his explanation with big questions—the purpose of the world and the people in it—and how this influences psychodrama: “Our psychodramatic work with people invariably gains flavor and quality from our concept of man [sic]” (1974: 48-49). To sum up this “flavor,” we are in process, moving along a path towards something.

The psychodrama director’s theology (1974: or whatever s/he believes in) affects the way he/she conducts a psychodrama session. Indeed, our personal “theology” has a bearing on everything we do or say. In this regard, the director’s orientation to salvation is especially important as he/she helps people deal with their frustrations and lost-ness. “What we mean by ‘salvation’ (1974: whether used psychologically or religiously),” he says, “determines how we work to bring the resources of our being into the lives of people in helping them overcome their sense of frustration and failure” (1974: 49). No director can assist others in an area that is unresolved in his/her own life, which means directors must undergo extensive therapy as a part of their training.

Life is a dynamic process; it is not static. Oman asserts that “a ‘Theology of Relationship’ assumes the dynamic quality of life as a process of achieving identity that sustains and moves

life toward its fulfillment..." (1974: 49). Psychodrama helps men and women in the processes they choose. What men and women do involves what he calls "an endowment," which is both a potential, and an achievement—the actual—both a being and a becoming, for a person to accept and fulfill "the true dimensions of his [sic] nature" (1974: 49). The processes of achieving "these true dimensions" of one's identity and fulfilling one's "endowment" are bound up with relationships at three levels. "A Theology of Relationship," Oman says, "is built on the premise that what man does is important to himself [sic], to his fellow men, and to God" (1974: 49). The Theology for Psychodrama, then, requires reconciliation at each of these three levels.

Relationship with the Self

We must first be reconciled with ourselves. Ever since Viktor Frankl, we know that we need meaning to fulfill our potential, "our endowment," and to become what we will be. "A Theology of Relationship is not remote," says Oman, "It is engaged in the day to day struggle to find meaning and purpose" (1974: 49). Despite the givens of our lives—being either male or female, our time, place and circumstances, we have considerable freedom to do what we want with them. What we do gives meaning. It is *our* meaning. "This meaning," Oman claims, "gives us 'power to become'" (1974: 49). It is a kind of launching pad for the next step in life's journey.

If this personalized meaning and the attitudes surrounding it provide the foundational force for becoming, then reconciliation begins with the self and one's attitudes. We need to attend to them carefully. And, because action is linked to attitude, we need first to be reconciled with our own self. Only then is it possible to reconcile with others. As Oman puts it, "The Doctrine of Reconciliation is concerned with right relationship with the self, since the attitude a man has toward himself becomes a source of his action" (1974: 49).

In psychodrama we share Oman's concern that many of the problems of our age are due to an inability to organize powerful emotions. Multiple emotions without any hierarchy of values lead to turmoil, chaos and confusion. For healthy integration we need an ordering of emotions organized around a large enough purpose or value to command them. Here psychodrama comes to our aid for it helps put order into our emotions. "Psychodrama," he says, "is intended to help troubled and confused persons to re-order the emotions of life, so that the potential for love can become the actual of love" (1974: 49). It also helps us to gain deeper insight into our lives so that we won't be held back by constantly retrying overworked inadequate responses. "It is hoped," he says, "that each psychodrama will help the protagonist deal with his [sic] frustrations and futility in such a way that he will gain insight that will lead his life in more positive direction" (1974: 49).

The Theology for Psychodrama holds that "one has to achieve an inner mastery that will give a person power over the things of life rather than letting them have power over him [sic]." (1974: 49). Inner conflicts, especially over values, are the basis of neurosis. They hold us back from fulfilling our potential, our "endowment." Psychodrama is meant to bring about an inner harmony letting the protagonist discover what will be best for him or her. This kind of harmony, or being "right" within the self, Oman asserts, is essential. "The ability of a person to value himself [sic], even to love himself, is basic to self-fulfillment" (1974: 50). From the solid base of self-love one is then empowered to move ahead responsibly, for the higher the self-regard the greater one's capacity for responsible action.

Relationship with Others

Group life, or the structure of our relationship with others, follows the same pattern as for one's relationship with self. We cannot live apart from others, and living with others requires a healthy attitude towards the self and others. This means that the Doctrine of Reconciliation "must eventuate in forgiving and forgetting (acceptance) ..." (1974: 50). If we are to fulfill our destiny, our endowment, we have no other choice in the matter. We **MUST** forgive and forget. Otherwise "meaning disappears and life is threatened when the structures of meaningful relationships are broken" (1974: 50).

This happens regardless of whether it is by chance, carelessness or design. Human relations do get broken. Accidental separation from the social structure, which gives meaning to life can occur through any kind of crisis—unemployment, illness, accidents or death. Then in psychodrama the group works to overcome the alienation. Careless separation in relationships often occurs through preoccupation with work or other things. It eventually separates husbands and wives, siblings, families, bosses and employees. The sense of belonging is broken. When the harm is done a person realizes he/she is lost or displaced, has taken a wrong turn. Through psychodrama, a person can 'be found,' and be restored. A community can be healed and the dangers that threaten to destroy life, where there is no reconciliation, can be averted. The task of restoring the essential relationship is the work of a concerned community, and "this is what the ideal church should be," says Oman. The psychodrama stage is thus a microcosm of Church—the people of God.

Of course, as creatures we do have a free will. We can choose resentment, anger, revenge and self-pity; we can run from responsibility, waste our resources and talents; we can break the laws and bring suffering to self and others. Where psychodrama won't work is with the isolate, the loner, the person or group who insists on "doing his own thing". In order to be healed, a person must want to get better. In the end, we are responsible to ourselves. Thus, the first step of the "separated" person (or group) is to "come to himself". This is the beginning of reconciliation, of healing. Religiously we associate it with conversion, *shv*, a turnabout. But as Oman defines it, "This is not a religious experience, it is a very human common sense desire to re-establish himself [sic] to the framework of persons and values that he had turned his back on" (1974: 50-51).

Relationship with God: the Supreme Relationship

Oman observes that in psychodrama the emphasis is on restoration to the relatedness that gives meaning to life (1974: 51). Relatedness with God is the supreme relationship. This leads to the third level of relationship which he calls, "the bond of communication, between creature and creator" (1974: 51). Theologian, R. R. Niebuhr, and psychologist, Henry Stack Sullivan, both agree that our human predicament can be summed up in our "anxiety." Oman notes that 20th century scholars have gradually translated "religious talk," theological and Biblical terms, into secular vocabulary. But rather than try to upend this trend he applauds this as finally making Christian ideas accessible to the public. "Through this kind of up-dating of our vocabulary, we no longer speak about 'prevenient grace,' but about the experience of being forgiven and accepted" (1974: 51). "Sin" becomes "alienation: that is, we are not in touch with ourselves and our feelings" (1974: 51).

But this is nothing new. Long before psychology overtook theology, Kierkegaard noted humankind's feeling of alienation, despair, loneliness, lost-ness, and sickness-unto-death. He believed that these, and feelings of guilt—our human predicament—are our universal link. Our common brokenness or sinfulness unites us. Because it has been made more accessible through secular language, more and more people are now recognizing this bond. Like Kierkegaard we recognize "...our feelings of alienation, despair and loneliness as being basic to all men [sic]" (1974: 51).

Oman notes that both Psychodrama and Theology must be practical. Psychodrama is a practical healer because, by helping people learn how to relate with themselves, others and God, they overcome their lost-ness and regain momentum in life. He says, "Psychodrama offers a very practical way to help persons with their feelings of separation and confusion. In becoming aware of self and learning to relate with others and with their creator a new equilibrium comes into their lives" (1974: 51). In this process acceptance is key for it reduces anxiety and opens up our creative spontaneity. Oman says he is convinced that "the *only* way we can be healed (1974: made whole—holy) is acceptance!" (1974: 51). This is also the foundational approach of psychodrama. The use of psychodramatic methods helps persons to accept "what" they are, and when this occurs anxiety and depression diminish, and spontaneity and creativity are restored, because they know "who" they are (1974: 51).

For this reason, Oman calls acceptance "man's ultimate religious experience" (1974: 52). For a religious person it is to know and do the will of the Father. The person's strength of life grows from this will. But Oman would insist that whether the protagonist, the director, or the psychodrama group are "religious" or not, the work of psychodrama is a true religious vehicle because it requires acceptance.

Acceptance doesn't come easy. Feelings of low worth resulting from overwhelming concern with pain, guilt and death are often the cause of destructive behavior. Nobody is proud of them and it is hard to admit imperfections. Psychodrama meets this challenge head on, for it helps us to "develop the courage to be imperfect and to freely ask and receive without the neurotic fear that these will put us under obligation" (1974: 52). The psychodrama group can be trusted to hold our confidences and our "sins," for the psychodramatic stage requires complete confidentiality and empathy. Oman notes the benefit of this: "Here in the safety of an empathetic audience the injured person may be able to express the feelings he [sic] dare not express anywhere else" (1974: 53).

Looking beyond draws us to our full potential. It offers possibilities for hope, guidance and strength. Oman notes that, if we are to succeed in our struggle for values, "we must relate ourselves to something beyond ourselves that strengthens our spirits and becomes a perpetual source of guidance and strength, only then can we become the persons it is possible for us to be" (1974: 52). In psychodrama this is done by acting out future scenes in the present tense—infusing them into our present lives.

The Theology of Relationship demands relevance—not abstraction. This depends on recognizing the relevance of theology for all of life. Psychodrama must also be relevant. It is a means to an

end. Participants in psychodrama are given the chance to explore new roles, rehearse them and expand them to meet their changing situations and conditions. Here they have the chance to learn new skills and practice them adequately. Oman notes that within its frame of reference, “an individual can develop his own beatitudes (beautiful attitudes). Within it the group life can be cultivated so that in mutual concern people may practice the virtues of acceptance, understanding, and good will” (1974: 53). The Theater of Reconciliation in Oman’s view is meant to be “a microcosm of group living within which the processes of experimental living can be moved forward, and the discipline of practical brotherhood be realized” (1974: 53).

All of this is orchestrated by the psychodrama director, of which Oman has had considerable experience. Oman considers this role to be a very special one. S/he is “a guide, a teacher, a counselor and a model in a way of life that communicates a way of life” (1974: 52).

I interpret Oman to be saying that psychodrama, when done well, goes beyond other psychotherapeutic modes. He is pointing to the possibility that given a certain direction, it bears the mark of the Holy Spirit and can be a true sacramental vehicle of reconciliation. He says, “A psychodrama becomes a reconciling factor when it is the means of helping men and women understand and accept themselves and others as they grow in their awareness of their creator” (1974: 53).

Oman’s Theology of Relationship, then, has special relevance for psychodrama—especially when in a typical session people ask questions like, “Why can’t I find inner peace?” Psychodrama helps the person or group to see their failures “not as a signal for cosmic retribution, but rather as an invitation to accept God’s forgiving love, which is the first step towards self-forgiveness” (1974: 53). God’s forgiving love is concretely manifested in the loving acceptance offered by the audience and all those present. Theologically and experientially, God’s forgiving love works through them. For the protagonist it is not just nice words or “play-acting,” it is palpably real and spiritually nourishing—a true “sacrament” of reconciliation.

In order for life to move forward it must have meaning. Oman says life cannot move forward “unless it achieves a meaning and purpose for the processes in which it is participating” (1974: 53). Life is a search for meaning which it discovers through relationship. At highpoints, or key transitions in life, and in the final event, they both merge as one—the “supreme relationship,” which “is found at the point where life discovers its most abundant meaning.” In this light, theology “is not so much a study as it is a resource for self-actualization” (1974: 53). Both theology and psychodrama, then, are practical resources for assisting life to discover meaning through relationship. In this way traditional theology takes on new relevance for psychodrama, and psychodrama for theology. In the words of Oman, “The place of man [sic] in his own sight, in the sight of his fellows, and in the plan of God, becomes the starting point in the adventure to finding life’s fullest meaning” (1974: 53).

Some implications for God’s Mission in our Age

Using the text or pretext of an essay on psychodrama, Oman subtly broadens our understandings of church in ways that raise some basic questions for Church and God’s mission in our post-modern context, particularly as they affect what is being called “new evangelization” contra the secularization of our globe.

I believe it to be Oman's implicit contention that this "new evangelization" is fully under way right now, not in opposition to secular voices, but subtly through them. If the core of reconciliation, without which we are prevented from ever reaching our human destiny, from fulfilling our endowment and becoming our true selves, is now being made available to the whole world, regardless of their religious background or theology, through psychodrama, what might the Church's missional response be? When done well might it not be held up as a contemporary movement of the Spirit? Or at a time when the need for reconciliation is greater than ever should the Church persist in keeping this important instrument at arm's length?

And if a new kind of secular communion is revealed in psychodrama in the way the group as a whole accepts the human sinful condition and that of the particular sinner where he/she is, and shares with the protagonist some of their "life" as a confirmation, a support, and life-giving nourishment to nurture his/her journey forward to his/her divine endowment, then is this not also a secularized sacramental form? Is it not a communion for the masses who are not, and probably never will be, baptized Christians? Is it not translating the meaning of Church—the people of God, His communion of saints—into our own time and circumstance? And if so, what might the Church's response be to this parallel sacramental world? In modeling God's presence to the world are latter day missionaries not to be all things to all men and women? Are we not to enter into their worlds, learn their languages and cultures as inculturation bodes? Or at a time when the world is starving for the bread of life are we to insist they first be circumcised?

Reference:

John B. Oman, "A Theology of Psychodrama: In Memory of Jacob L. Moreno, M.D., Founder of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama," *Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama*. New York: Beacon House Inc., Vol. XXVII, 1974, Nos. 1-4. Pp. 48-54.