

*On QUESTING for IDENTITY,
some CONCLUSIONS for psychodrama directors*
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Reference to the psychodramas below will facilitate our review of identity, the parentified child, adoption, the child in living memory, boundaries and violence.

19.01 **Marcy**, age 16. **I'll cherish the child in me.**

She described herself as frightened and sad. One of her good friends left today. I asked what was on her mind, and she replied that "destruction" was on her mind. She has destroyed things in the past. *I feel like ripping something up*, she said. She is angry with herself, her Mom and the world. *I'm always angry at stuff. I'm sad that I can't get my life together.* Her peers selected her as the protagonist today. She might've backed out for the sake of two others who were leaving the teen service soon, but when we asked them what they wanted to do it turned out that they were mostly interested in just being on stage. She came up with the creative idea of using them in a scene she had in mind as her parental figures, so we went with that.

1) This was a recent family therapy with mother, step-father and the social worker present. When Marcy arrived they were already in session. They were exploring the possibility of sending her to a place well known for its long term care of teens. She will not be going home, so the social worker was going through items in the application. Some questions were routine, but others struck Marcy as personal and confidential, such as *Have you ever been pregnant?* She felt it was none of their business.

They also asked whether she'd ever been in trouble with the law, and this led to the stepfather explaining how the parent figures had thrown Marcy out of the house, and inasmuch as she couldn't make contact with a place to stay she spent the night in jail. The police tried to help her, but (she said) she *smarted off* at them. The stepfather indicated he was going to her school district to see whether he could get funding without which she'd be unable to go.

The stepfather sat between Marcy and her mother, and she rested her head on his shoulder. Mother explained why Marcy couldn't come back home, and emphasized that the friends she had were no good for her, setting forth her disdain in foul language. Marcy didn't dispute that this time, for she felt like her friends had forgotten her. She hadn't heard from them, and since coming to the hospital she has come to understand the bad influence they have on her. I cut the family therapy scene and set up an imaginary scene for Marcy to confront her mother.

2) Marcy told us how difficult that would've been in reality because their screaming graduates to violence. Here's what we did.

Managing the History of Violence on Stage

We told the protagonist that screaming, **even loud screams**, were acceptable here in the theater, but that physical violence wasn't. Inasmuch as Marcy warned us that the one may lead to the other, we indicated that any action required would have to be done **pantomime in slow motion without touching**. We allow more than expected, but insert a limit. Scream louder, but no action. Act with self-restraint, and don't touch. Note how this breaks up the habitual sequence.

Facts about her background emerged. Marcy doesn't know her natural father, and mother won't give her any information which would allow her to find him. The stepfather in the family therapy whom Marcy gets along fairly well with is her second stepfather. The first stepfather, whom mother acquired without warning when Marcy was six, was alcoholic and brutal, particularly toward the mother. This man welcomed the competition between his daughter and Marcy, and took them to the basement where they could fight it out with each other. He wore a big grin while it was going on. Today Marcy regrets this, and hates him for it. At this point we may introduce a surplus reality scene, maybe locate it temporarily off stage, to give the grown up Marcy the opportunity to

Confront

an empty chair representing him, or if we already have someone playing the role, sit in the chair and take it. When it bothers the protagonist to deal with a live person, because of memories of retaliation, I've said the stepfather is bound in the chair and can't get out, while I place my hands heavily on his shoulders.

3) Time and time again when this man beat up mother, Marcy, though only seven, tried to get between them. He threw her down the hall when she got in his way. Marcy was a **parentified child**. When mother was sick, it was she, and not another adult who tried to care for her. Marcy made soups to feed her mother. Mother discouraged the developing relationship between her parents and their granddaughter. The grandmother died of cancer last year.

4) We reviewed the scene of the last contact Marcy had with her. Grandmother was much more loving for Marcy than was her mother, and is sorely missed. Grandfather is still living, however, and Marcy enjoys him. Mother and the uncles never forgave grandmother for deserting them when they were children. The scene with grandmother and Marcy ended with an embrace.

5) I asked Marcy about her relationships with her male peers. She indicated she'd had a three year relationship which just ended. I asked whether she anticipated marrying and having kids of her own someday and she said she planned to, and she'd give them a lot more than her mother ever gave her. One of the things which came through to me, loud and clear, was how rejected Marcy has felt. Her mother has told her that she wished she'd never had her, and blames her for ruining her life. Mother was not ready for motherhood when Marcy was born.

6) Marcy hungers for love and affection. I interviewed her as a five year old in kindergarten, when she was happy, loved her teacher, was talented and artistic. All that changed when she was six.

Nurturing the Living Child of Memory

We brought in a double to be the child Marcy, and moved Marcy to another chair to be herself today. We brought the auxiliary who played mother into the scene and created a situation where today's-Marcy comes to the defense of the child-Marcy. Marcy pointed out to mother what a fine daughter she had and that she should be proud of her. Then we reversed Marcy into her child self to hear all those good things coming from the double representing Marcy-today. I dismissed mother and invited Marcy to embrace her double, indicating that I felt it appropriate for her to give herself what her mother hadn't. There is much in Marcy to admire, and I capitalized on all I could find.

When more vigorous defense may be indicated, such as rescue from a disaster. Line up and sequence are the same. This is one way to ameliorate a lingering and festering trauma.

7) At the end Marcy hastened to let us know that her mother wasn't all bad and enumerated some of the things she appreciated. What hurt Marcy most of all was mother's promiscuity and involvement in drugs which took her away from her.

Marcy's peers shared appropriately and were very supportive of her. A male teen told her he was touched at what she presented.

Marcy's Anger at Herself

This is the familiar anger turned inward which we see as the source of depression--- though there may be other sources too. I would rather avoid the inner vs outer metaphor, for where in space the anger is may be irrelevant or at least problematic. One of the difficulties is that many people treat their emotions as if they come from somewhere outside themselves. I bypass the localization commitment in favor of referring to this as **reflexive anger**. She may blame others; others may blame her, but when she blames herself this is reflexive, coded in my system: 15/, /15, and 15/15, respectively. 15 is the protagonist's anger situation and the slash represents where she stands with respect to the situation.

Here's what we do about it. We set up an intrapsychic dialogue with the protagonist as herself confronting her double, who is also herself. One side becomes the accuser, the other side the accused. We role reverse as needed to heighten the feeling, while the protagonist throws in all the evidence and arguments she uses against herself. At some point I pull out the protagonist and send in another auxiliary to maintain ongoing dialogue.

We call the protagonist a facilitator, and give her the assignment of negotiating between the warring factions, to do whatever is necessary to effect a peaceful resolution. She speaks directly to the auxiliary participants, or better, from time to time at her initiative she role reverses with one side or the other, and then reverses back to her facilitator position to see what effect the intervention has. Finally the director says, do what you need to bring the conflict to a close for now. If under the best of scenarios an actual reconciliation is received, that calls for hug. Otherwise at least we have shared the pain and diluted it a bit.

Here is a psychodrama solution for another angry protagonist:

19.02 Terri, age 14. When will I bury these people?

She described herself as nervous and anxious. She wanted to work on her siblings. The group chose her over several others.

1) We began with a typical dinner scene from when she was ten. At that time her sister Brenda was 16, class president, overbearing and self-centered. Her brother Tom, the eldest at 18, was caring and concerned. He tried to keep the family in order and stop the fighting. Her brother Nick, at 15, took up for the younger brother Kevin. He and Terri were not close then. Kevin at 13 was a prankster, but not seriously. But he was mean to her and called her names. Both Nick and Kevin were inclined to 'smart off, the latter to the stepfather. The step-father' was not on bad terms with the family generally, except for Kevin. And at this dinner he made a hostile remark toward Kevin who responded in kind and the situation at the table escalated from there involving nearly everyone. Terri crumbled under the weight of all the anger. In our enactment of the scene, she cried.

2) We extended the first scene by moving into the present and declaring that the whole family had seen the first scene. Standing behind each person's chair Terri presented the likely reaction of each one today at witnessing that scene, then listened to each auxiliary presenting the predicted reaction, which was, on the whole, quite positive. She sees her family as being entirely behind her today.

3) In the course of scene 2 it came out that the whole family is aware of the sexual abuse Terri suffered as a child, and are angry at the perpetrators in her behalf. These included her natural father, her father's brother, and especially the grandfather who died some years ago, and a 19 year old neighbor. Most of this occurred even before she started school, and prior to her moving here from West Virginia. I paused long enough to elicit comments from the group reassuring Terri that this information had not altered their feeling for her one iota.

I placed an **auxilliary chair** before Terri, saying that the chair stood for all those who had molested her, and encouraged her to express toward them her present feelings, which she did, up to a point. I invited the members of the group who wanted to stand behind her to do so, and the entire group did. I called upon them to say to the representative empty chair what they were feeling toward those who abused little Terri, and they did, quite vociferously. One said they ought to be shot and buried, and this led to his saying to Terri, *When are you going to bury these people?* Now she was ready.

I told her she could do with that (heavy sturdy) chair whatever she felt like doing to her abusers. She gave a cry, upended the chair, throwing it off stage, to the applause of the group. We were out of time and conducted our sharing nonverbally with concluding hugs. Terri wore a bright smile as we went to lunch, and manifested concern toward a peer with similar issues, who was much affected by the psychodrama.

Comment

Though overwhelmed by the anger she comes out with a positive experience. One reason to include this session is the logistic problems it presents. The group itself was large, and the number of persons to represent through auxiliary participation was quite large also. A beginning director could get tied in knots trying to cope with all the potential role reversals we normally use. So we simply identified each person sitting on stage at the imagined table as this or that sibling. Having Terri go behind the chairs and characterize each person eliminated the necessity for role reversals, and gave them all considerable latitude for the improvised roles they were to play. Such disastrous mealtime chaos has been in nearly everyone's history, and those on stage entered eagerly into the fray. This makes control of a large group much easier. What would otherwise be nervous tangential restlessness gains focus in developing the session.

There were too many perpetrators and too little time. We were not favorably disposed toward seeing them as complex persons but as monsters. Jamming them all into the same chair made sense in this context, and it allowed Terri to deal with them all at the same time. I was concerned that Terri be strong enough to wield it, but with the adrenaline flowing it was no problem. The risk was to the furniture, but as it happened there was no visible damage. It might have even been better if there had been, as part of the 'cost of doing business.' With more time we might have heaped everything we could find upon it. Parenthetically, I have some hesitation about burying anything in psychodrama. We may have to dig it up again! I know of a psychodrama done abroad where the protagonist

buried his father, who was very much alive, and who heard about the psychodrama later. Such fall out! And not very intelligent psychodrama directing either.

Terri's peers made her session a healing experience. In psychodrama, as in all forms of group therapy, the group is the vehicle of change. Those who do individual therapy in a group setting have missed the powerful contribution of the method.

Sorting Out Emotions

Not even anger comes through so clearly all the time. Again and again it occurs in the context of other powerful feelings. One of the most common is hurt. The danger is that the competing emotions may cancel each other out. Inasmuch as our feelings are an integral part of our decision making it behooves us to learn how to discern among them. Often I use the **Two Chairs Technique**. The protagonist may have been expressing anger when it dries up for no reason others can see. When I inquire, I'm told that what he's experiencing is not so much anger as hurt. That's when I set forth two chairs, one to express his anger and another his hurt. I make it an intrapsychic dialogue, with the protagonist shifting back and forth between the chairs while he works it out. Sometimes it's not a competition but anger covering up fear, or vice versa. But I am careful to find a situational context. Abstractions are of little use. We used the two chairs technique in the Prell psychodramas

Identity

This is a central issue in dealing with youth, and we've already devoted considerable space to it. Here I shall comment on the matter of negative identity, the dangers of which are not generally appreciated. Negative does not refer to the absence of identity but to the presence of an identity as **bad**. On page 161 we present the Flossie psychodrama, in which the protagonist's father pounds on the car in an attempt to reach 13 year old Flossie who has locked herself inside, and calls her *fat, lazy, bitch, spoiled rotten brat*. When we dealt with their relationship from the safety of a surplus reality scene, we were astounded to hear she wanted nothing from him. She told him in role *I'm sorry I'm such a bad girl and cause you so much pain and hurt*. When they arrived at the home for their holiday dinner, mother told Flossie to *put on a happy face*. It's enough to make a person choke, especially before a holiday dinner. The tragic fact is that the children haven't done anything to deserve such treatment, yet time and again, they insist they have. To what effect? If one is bad, one may do anything bad, and deserves anything bad that happens to him. Early on in this volume we presented the girl with the killer conscience. In her mind she was so bad she didn't deserve to live. In her psychosis the negative identity was given a voice, one she could hardly argue with, for it spoke her truth. How many others go all the way to suicide because of their negative identity!

Yet we live in a culture where the public is eager to point the accusing finger at all those bad little boys and girls, whom they relentlessly doom to an adult career of badness, if indeed they were to attain maturity. Little wonder we have millions in prison.

Our culture also encourages the fantasy that badness is a thing, which, like dirt can be washed off, or like a tumor, can be cut out. It's not that easy, and it's a good thing it isn't. The negative side of life fulfills an important function, when sustained in proper balance. The danger lay in oversimplified global thinking. If I'm not all good, then I must be all bad. Satisfying what's expected is often such a momentous task I give up in despair, and stumble into the sole alternative, a bad person. Perfectionists, accustomed to belittling

others, stand ready to validate the inescapable conclusion. What a weary population need is acceptance, not more rejection. Words have enormous power. Let's have them work for us in psychodrama, not against us. With the proper use of words, we can gain precision in working out a positive identity.

We offer the technique of *selective identification*. A little child has only a few models at hand out of which to construct a person. But he does have more than one, and that opens the door to taking this or that as my own. Unless I've made myself a carbon copy of someone else, my selections increase, and my characteristics multiply and grow in complexity. But some families try to exert tight control. We are made to feel guilty for slight deviations. In psychodrama we open the door. The protagonist faces representations of the parent figures. He cannot take everything, for there is too much, and some offerings are incompatible with other options. We put it into deliberate action whereby I take something representing specific traits from each person, and bypass others not consistent with the person who I want to be. And in the exercise I receive approval both for what I take and what I refuse. I may say of this or that, this is me or this is not me. I own or disown. That's how I become who I am.

19.03 Dana, age 15. **How could you use me?**

She was about to go home. There were three relationships she wanted to be clear on, mom, dad, and her special male friend. The first two scenes covered her relationship with her parents, but we will move directly to her special male friend. The peer of which she spoke was present, and took the stage at her request. I noted we'd gone beyond pretend to an encounter, and therefore we had two protagonists rather than one. For the director, it was a lot like coming into the middle of a movie, though the group had the advantage of a prior discussion in group therapy. What Dana asked for was a frank and honest statement concerning their relationship, which he began giving, for at this very session he said what he was striving to do with his life, so that he could bring his therapy to a successful completion. But he failed to take into account how she would hear him. He told her he had *used her*, a misleading choice of words, given what he was on the way to telling her. He referred to his falling back on his relationship with her when everything else seemed to have gone wrong. He felt that she had done the same with him.

Before he could elaborate and clarify his meaning, Dana ran out of the room in tears. He told us she hadn't waited for him to finish, and so I directed a staff member present to retrieve her. It happened he was supposed to have been protagonist today on another subject, but we couldn't get to it unless she came back. She returned, apologizing to the group for running out. She told him *I really meant the things I said to you*. He said that he, too, had meant what he said to her, which confused her, because his earlier message and today's message seemed incompatible to her. He explained that he believed they were both being distracted from their therapy by their relationship and that it was in their mutual interest to put their relationship on hold for the time being. He was not ruling out taking up where they'd left off, when it was no longer a therapy problem. He had to repeat this a variety of ways before Dana could hear him.

What was getting in her way is that it seemed he was rejecting her like her father had. I called upon her to identify the ways in which he was different from her father, and at last after considerable pain and tears, she got what he was saying to her. Here I used an

she needs. But when at last she overcomes enormous fear to seek mother's protection, she runs into a wall of disbelief. Mother cannot afford to believe her, because then she will have to end her marital relationship, and how can she make it on her own? If indeed he has done as daughter says, then he must go to jail, and again, she'll be all alone. But were it not for the cloak of secrecy, the situation could not have developed in the first place, or beyond a single isolated incident. The daughter's relationship with her mother is essential to her normal development as a woman, but how can she get the nurturing she needs in a situation like this? Her establishing a home of her own requires an intense and satisfying relationship with one of the opposite sex, but how can she trust a male if she cannot trust her father?

There is also the matter of boundaries among siblings. They must learn to respect one another's property and persons. When brothers break down doors or peek in on sisters dressing, life at home becomes intolerable. A girl has the right to expect her parents will enforce limits on the other children of the household. Even a little sister's dogging her footsteps or ruffling through her things makes life painful without parentally enforced boundaries.

Futures

In contrast with traditional therapies, in psychodrama we emphasize the future more than the past. We know that patients have come to the point where they are now because of the pasts they've had. The past may drive one to despair. It's fixed and unchanging, so they feel, and nothing can be done to change it. What good is the quest for cause, if there's nothing that can be done about it? A common impression is that therapists are long on collecting information and short on fixing anything.

True, the psychodrama director spends half the session getting a picture of what is happening in the protagonist's life, but his only interest in the past is in those incidents and episodes which enter into the protagonist's decisions about his future.. The protagonist is an agent making choices to bring him the future he wants, but his view of the future may be narrow or unrealistic. He is in the process of living out a story with an open ending. The psychodrama director is an expert on stories. Simultaneously he bends and breaks the protagonist view of his capacities and opportunities. In the latter part of the session he clears the way to a new vision, and gets the protagonist moving toward it. The protagonist options are finite. He cannot do anything or everything he wants to, but he may live in a much larger world than he ever imagined, and to a greater extent than he ever dared dream, it's in his hands. As indicated in the section on techniques we have several which make use of future projections. Among them are the protagonist's dream future, his nightmare future, and his likely future at various points, such as the short run and the long haul. We ask *What's the best that can happen? What's the worst? What's likely to happen, given this or that?* There's a whole lot of breathing space among those projections. Of course, it's not all up to me, but I'm the one whose hand is on the helm.

identification/disidentification exercise. When I introduced this over thirty years ago unfortunately I called it 'splitting,' which like the psychodrama here had different associations for my colleagues than it had for me, and as a result for most it remained in limbo. Here's how it works.

When a protagonist treats one person as if he were another, such as Dana's reacting to her boyfriend as she had to her father, then I set out to have the protagonist discover that the two are no at all that much alike. We place two auxiliaries back to back, center stage, facing opposite walls right and left of the stage. The protagonist's task is to list their differences, even if they're trivial. Here Dana began saying, *one is old and the other young*. With each characteristic mentioned the auxiliaries take a small step forward. If the protagonist slips up and mentions a difference, they back up one step. Before long the auxiliaries are far apart, perhaps even to the wall. Then we reverse the process, with the auxiliaries standing with their backs to opposite walls, looking across the stage at each other. Now the protagonist's task is to list the ways in which they are alike, taking a step forward for each item mentioned. Yet after listing the few characteristics which have claimed the protagonist's attention he runs out of items, leaving the two auxiliaries far apart. They're not so much alike after all. This is usually sufficient to convince. Now if one of the auxiliaries is the protagonist's double, the exercise shows the extent of his identification with someone, but more importantly, we learn *in what ways the two are alike or are different*. With the raising of consciousness we are freed to make informed choices of who we will not be and who we will.

Often this subject arises because of transferences that arise in the course of individual psychotherapy. It's very hard for a patient to discover his therapist is not at all who he thought he was. He is given too few reality hooks on which to hang an accurate perception. The therapy has reached a critical point when at last his expectations are frustrated. If he can maintain the relationship in the face of this devastating discovery, he is well on the road to recovery, for his illness was constituted on the systematic distortion which his therapy laid bare. But in psychodrama we do the opposite, for we are not at all reticent about presenting ourselves in a straightforward way. We don't wipe out the patient's distortions, but they're rarely centered on the director. Rather upon his peers and on the absentees they represent on stage. As they manifest in public they are subject to ongoing correction.

The young man was quite right that their love relationship posed a threat to the therapy, for their intense involvement with each other would make transference with therapists problematic, and therefore defeat the goal of long term treatment. How can one get this point across to patients? They have to go ahead on faith.

Recurring Topics and Themes

I shall cite several which have caught my attention during the preparation of this book. There are the related matters of secrets and boundaries. Secrecy prevails when boundaries are violated. The boundary between generations exists for the sake of the healthy growth of children. When a father acts as if there were no boundary, and behaves inappropriately toward his child, he places all his family relationships at risk---to say nothing of social repercussions. The secret which allows the deviant relationship to continue isolates the child, confuses her, and causes her pain, for it places her in conflict with her mother whom