

## A PSYCHODRAMATIST LOOKS AT ANXIETY

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I intend to be more practical than theoretical, but I may not succeed, for anxiety has long been a subject dear to the hearts of philosophically inclined clinicians, especially Freud. I find Moreno particularly refreshing, however. Not that he had much to say specifically on anxiety as such, but that he focused on health rather than pathology. If we consider the emphasis on **spontaneity** we shall learn much of relevance to anxiety. Moreno has said that '**robotism is the opposite of spontaneity.**' Expanding on this, we know that robotism, compulsive conventionality, or bureaucratic retreat all exist as a flight from spontaneity, where spontaneity has been seen as impulsive, dangerous, unreliable, chaotic...etc.

Let us distinguish between **spontaneity** and **impulsivity**, which, far from being synonymous, are poles apart. Consider the manic patient, whose energy runs away with him. Like a loose cannon, he shoots off in all directions, only hitting his target once in a while, almost, it seems, by accident! The impulsive person cannot delay responding, which means that he allows no time for reality testing. Therefore, he is nearly always at odds with his environment. Moreno classified this as **pathological spontaneity**.

The **addictive personality** has little room for spontaneity. While still in the midst of his addiction, he responds to the slightest hint of anxiety with rushing for a fix. The addictive personality in recovery fills his life with activity, especially social activity in concert with other recovering addicts. Fresh from the rehab many join a 90 day program of consecutive AA-type meetings. And even after a let-up in the frequency of attendance at such meetings, persons in recovery occupy themselves with helping fellow sufferers to maintain their recovery. I would be the last to find fault with this, for the effort is commendable. And it works. But let us hope for a richer, more creative style of life for one whose recovery has extended long enough to seem relatively secure. May he dare face silence, openness, living without the sword of specific agendas hanging overhead, enjoy 'looking out the window time,' or 'stop to smell the roses.' With that more blessed existence comes the discovery that one may enjoy freedom without anxiety. Now at long last, one may get in touch with spontaneity.

Freud and Moreno profoundly differed in temperament, which was clearly manifest in their theoretical preferences. Freud was impressed with the **trauma of birth**, whereas Moreno regarded infants as showing an abundant spontaneity, through which developmental process proceeds as the growing one masters his environment. Freud saw life as the attempt to keep the savage within oneself at bay. Anxiety emerges as chaos threatens to undermine structures cultures and individuals have painfully constructed over the years. There anxiety was for Freud a key explanatory principle, and he thought most of life was concerned with building and maintaining adequate defense against it. As a matter of fact, as a responsible clinician, I do indeed respect defenses.

What is more reprehensible than the psychodrama director who in his avid quest to shake the the protagonist loose has failed to take into account the importance of the glue which has been holding the protagonist together up till now! When he has overestimated the protagonist's ego strength, he'd better be pre-pared to put the pieces back together again. And if he can't, the phone number of an understanding psychiatrist who'll be there with his bagful of medications to cover up for his malpractice.

Now if you're directing a protagonist who becomes overwhelmed there on stage, let us hope you have enough experience to distinguish between normal, intense emotion and the

powerful passions and panics that can transform your session into a catastrophe. I've seen several beginning directors hasten to choke off emotional expression. For example, they call for reverse roles too soon. Your task as director is to acknowledge that feeling, if you don't have a double there to do it for you. A gentle hand on the bowed shoulder reassures at the very moment when it's most needed. More than that, when there is clear evidence that the protagonist has regressed, a warm, solid hug may be in order, and be prepared, if necessary, to sustain the embrace over several minutes. If you feel you need to, then ask permission. **Is it all right if I hold you like this?** as you gently do so. Watch the cues. Does this help, or is the protagonist even more threatened? Take into account the protagonist's history. Can he fit you into the role of some supportive figure from the early years? For example, one might say, **how good it was when grandpa put his arm around you when you were little**, as you do the same.

The protagonist may plead with you to stop the psychodrama. Of course you honor the request, though you try to keep him seated on stage, as you say, **you needn't do anymore at this time. You've done enough. Now I want you to let your peers do something for you. They're going to share with you out of experiences which, one way or another, parallel yours.** But maybe the protagonist has been too fast for you and has made it back from the stage to his seat in the audience before you can get a word in. One may say to him, **That's fine. I'm glad you felt free to return to your seat there in the group when you've had enough. You've given of yourself to the group. Now let the group give to you, as one peer to another. Frank has something to say. Let's hear his sharing.** One more possibility, the protagonist may bolt the theater, as one did for me not long ago. I left my trainee in charge of the group, while I dashed out to accompany the protagonist. We circled the building together, and I succeeded bringing her back to the stage we'd left, on the strength of my promise that all she'd have to do was listen.

Sometimes it's a member of the audience who gets overwhelmed. Among the options available are to bring the audience member to the stage in some plausible capacity, or to freeze the scene underway, and encourage mutual sharing with the protagonist. When the audience member bolts the theater, I send a trainee or a staff member after them rather than desert the protagonist. When there are no such present, there is almost always a patient who is ready to pursue. Have them do so, directing the patient to bring the peer back, if possible, but if not, take her to the unit, and come back yourself, soon as you can!

Back to basics: Remember the distinction between anxiety and fear. Fear is more focused than anxiety, and easier to deal with. If protagonists are fully involved, there is no limit to the imaginative ways directors may reassure them. For example: surround the protagonist with chairs, or bring to the stage someone the protagonist trusts to the stage, or provide a double, or as director be a loud, aggressive advocate, scolding representatives of danger, while placing a protective arm about the protagonist. The director may open a scene declaring the abusive parent elderly (whether parents are or not they will be)! One reminds the protagonist: **Now that you're grown, you've nothing to fear from him/her/them. Let 'em know what they put you through. Tell 'em off. They can't do a thing to you anymore. I won't let them!**

If the protagonist's anxiety is not too severe, the director may make use of some form of guided imagery: **It's late afternoon, and you're with a close friend at the seashore,**

**watching the waves breaking on the beach. There's a gentle breeze. You're so warm and comfortable you've almost fallen asleep.** Sure, it's like hypnosis. What's wrong with that? We use suggestion all the time in everyday life. Acute anxiety indicates change is underway, threatening self-control, and therefore terrifying sufferers. Freud would say there has been a failure in repression, that primary processes are flooding the patient's ego. This usually points to some specific traumatic event, which psychodramatists can readily address, one way or another. When there is solid rapport between patient and director, directors take patients forward slowly in an enactment of the actual event, after first having reassured the patient **we're interested in what led up to that. We're not going to have you play it out again here and now.** When you've come to a halt, then leap-frog to the aftermath, and enact that.

I do this routinely with suicide attempts. I allow no role training of the actual deed, but jump to what actually happened afterwards, and/or to an enactment of what might've happened if the suicide had succeeded. I take the protagonist out of the action and put him in the mirror position, while his double lies crumpled on the floor to be discovered. I reverse the protagonist into the roles of those who discover him, or learn in turn of his demise. This may be guilt-inducing, but so be it! We're building a hedge against suicide.

In a situation involving molestation, rape, or physical abuse, it may be better, at least at first or in this session, not to confront the actual deed, but address it in derivative form, such as **who is the first person you told? Let's see what happened.** In that way the protagonist gets to describe within a scene what happened without actually having to do it once again.

— Moreover, the protagonist's fantasy of the reaction of his peers may require reality correction. The director may say **you're embarrassed to have your peers hear this. You're afraid they'll think less of you now. Let's check that out. Do you think less of the protagonist now that you know what he's been through?** I've never had a group let me down when I put the question that way. They always tell the protagonist that they feel closer than ever, and some may offer that they've had the same or a similar experience.

When the anxiety has to do with one's identity, this calls for delicate handling. It is as if the protagonist had said, **I am coming to be I know not what, or I'm coming to believe what I feared about myself is true. I'm crazy, or I'm a pervert.** When the protagonist names a negative identity, I inquire, **tell me what you mean by that. And, let's hear how you feel about that. Or, who do you trust enough to tell them what you're afraid of. Let's represent them here. Choose a peer, and bring her to the stage. Reverse roles. Let's assume they've been present during the session. Let's hear what they have to say to you now.**

At some point as director I may attempt cognitive restructuring. **If under outrageous circumstances one has behaved monstrously, this does not make one a monster, unless one continues practicing monstrous behavior. I want to return control of your life to you, and support you in your attempt to interrupt the undesirable pattern in favor of a better way of behaving under the circumstances. Let's practice that. Or I may say, Does one lie make a person a liar, or one theft a thief? Or I may say, Who among us has lived a perfect life? Let him who is without sin throw the first stone. Is there no room for forgiveness?**

One may set the scene to have the protagonist role reverse with the injured party, declare

that the injured party has been witness to the psychodrama so far, and let the protagonist in the role reversed position be as generous as the real person might actually be. Or if the injured person is a grudge holder, one may alter the conditions, such as **let's assume your father really understood where you're coming from, what might he say to you? Or let's assume that he's completely sober, and that he's recovered his mental faculties...etc.**

Turning to less dramatic, but much more common experiences, consider what Moreno has called **performance anxiety**. Or, if you prefer, **stagefright**. And patients in a group may hold back from the psychodrama stage for that reason. By now you know how to handle that. You get her on stage somehow and carry on a friendly conversation. Then you ask them to do something they can do easily such as, **Who is the important person in your life? Be her. Take a posture like she does. Answer my questions like she would. Let us meet her and learn why she's important to you...etc.** All directors know, and nearly all protagonists find out (and the group can verify this) that ten minutes into the drama the audience recedes, and the protagonist forget they're there. I often compare theater and psychodrama, saying, **the protagonist can do no wrong, for his task is to simply be himself, whoever he may be. In drama the audience is full of critics, and the professional actor must entertain them, whereas in psychodrama, it is the audience who is on trial, for it is their task to take care of the protagonist. It is not up to the protagonist to entertain them.**

One variation is the person who experiences performance anxiety elsewhere. This may call for a role training procedure, which is a straightforward, nonanxious routine, where peers enact the others from the protagonist's difficult situation, and where other peers take the protagonist's role dealing with it as he watches. Without letting the protagonist comment on what they've done, I may put him back into his own role to do whatever he wants. I may not even need to go all the way of using the mirror. I may just have the protagonist set up the scene, show us what usually happens, and then tell him **do it wrong**. I may even borrow an **implosive strategy**, representing the worst possible reaction. Then I remind him that this hasn't actually happened, and even if it did, **what would this group think of him? Or if you saw someone else (from the group) doing the same, what would you think of them?** Most protagonists are more generous with others than with themselves.

In the case of professional performers, actors, musicians, writers, artists, scientists, keep in mind Moreno's encounter in the theater with the famous actor who couldn't get into his role. Moreno shouted to him, **forget about being Zarathustra tonight. I'm more interested in you. Be who you are, be (whatever the man's name was)!** Of course that was an outrageous thing for Moreno to do, but it was also compassionate, and theoretically sound. We come face to face with performance anxiety when we try to be something we're not, or don't want to be. His recommendation: be who you are. That's far better than being someone else. This is what all successful performers end up doing anyway. And no one else can do it!

We also hear of **existential anxiety**. In the existential way of thinking all of us are caught between the horns of a dilemma. If we insist on staying as we are, this brings **existential guilt**, but when we try to move into unexplored territory, we experience **existential anxiety**. The existential danger is the loss of being, my dropping into the **abyss of nothingness**. The remedy, **to confront nothingness and take it into oneself**. If that's too philosophical for your taste, consider the fear of death. Our whole culture conspires to minimize, deny and

distract us from it. The death of strangers is OK (sort of), but not **my** death or the death of some-one vital to my living. If the protagonist has some kind of faith in a reality beyond the obvious, or in a Divine Being who cares, the psychodrama stage provides a splendid opportunity to respectfully and reverently explore whatever spiritual realities may be available to him. Everyone need not believe the same. All we need do is welcome his right to resolve his questions and take a stand. In this pluralistic world, ordinary people readily do just that.

Unlike Freud, who looked upon faith as a delusion, Moreno took a very positive and constructive attitude in this area. Apart from a conventional religious community, there are many avenues open. One may direct the protagonist to see his immortality in his children, just as he represents his parents...etc. of the previous generation continue to live on in him and in others. Or the director may put the accent on the completion of a specific task or reaching a certain level of accomplishment, or bringing interpersonal issues to closure -- and of rewriting one's own history in action. It is easier to let-go when we feel our lives have been completed.

Finally, a few comments on the relationship between warmup and spontaneity: As Moreno has said, **spontaneity propels the individual toward an adequate response to a new situation, or to a new response to an old situation.** It's not something we can save up for a rainy day. It is the self-initiated behavior which exists in the moment of action as the choice is being carried through. It is misleading to say that one person has more spontaneity than another, though I may show more spontaneity at one time than another. The variables are **appropriateness to the situation, the degree of competency for a solution, and the immediacy to the here and now of the situation** (See Ledford Bishof). Sometimes a solution may be novel but not adequate, adequate but not novel, or less than timely, but under optimal conditions spontaneity is all of these.

Spontaneity begets creativity, and creativity results in products we call **cultural conserves.** Spontaneity interacts with the cultural conserves to take us to creativity and more cultural conserves. Thus the process continues. Moreno has said of creativity, that **creativity is a sleeping beauty which needs a catalyzer, ... an unconservable energia ... to operate in the hic et nunc, the present.** This is spontaneity.

Spontaneity requires a warmup. I am warmed up to this or that problem, this or that person. This means that because of my involvement with a situation and my readiness to risk in the face of the presenting problem, possible approaches suggest themselves, I seize upon one of these on the assumption it will take me where I want to go. If it works, I have indeed been spontaneous. If it doesn't, I'll try another. If I slavishly hang on to an option, doing more of the same, despite its inadequacy, this is not spontaneity. If I feel I am not free to do otherwise, is it any wonder that I become anxious?

To be anxious is to be in flight from. To be spontaneous is to be in quest of. To focus on anxiety is to focus on pathology. To focus on spontaneity is to affirm freedom and health. One may think of treatment as building a role repertoire to meet life's opportunities and requirements through fostering maximum spontaneity. Keep spontaneity in mind and you'll have a better idea what to do in the face of your protagonist's anxiety -- and your own!