

To Facilitate Role Transitions

We ask, *What has caused me pain, or has messed up my life? What roles require revision or replacement?* I must let go of what doesn't work. When I do, what are the interpersonal consequences? I shall feel a lot of pressure to continue as I have been. I must resist this, and present myself as already a firm new self, who will not accept being treated as I once was. How do I do this? I find new role models, or find new aspects of those I already have. How do others handle what I face? What may I borrow from them?

Question the assumption that one should identify with others globally. Not only is this impossible, it is undesirable. I've directed hundreds of psychodramas where protagonists have ambivalent feelings toward parent-figures. So have you. Some protagonists reject outright all the parent-figures stand for, while others feel some compulsion to whitewash what they can't accept. Otherwise they'll feel guilty.

We raise the question, *What may I borrow from several models? You can pick and choose, you know. There's no obligation to buy out the store.* I have the protagonist address the auxiliary playing the parent figure, saying, *I want this specific trait, quality or characteristic of yours for mine too. Is that OK?*

Auxiliaries indicates that of course it's OK. and hands over something which symbolizes the gift the protagonist wants to own. That done, I have protagonists list those traits, qualities, habits and practices they don't want. If it turns out they already have some, we work out a way to symbolically hand them back. Then I reverse the protagonist into the role of the parent figure, and prompt them to give permission to refuse these unwanted characteristics. This isn't hard to do, because the parent-figures rarely want these either. When protagonists return to themselves, they hear the parent-figure auxiliaries more graciously let them off the hook. You don't drink sour milk.

I tailor the collection to the protagonist's wishes and needs, and then introduce a scene where one makes practical use of something obtained. Role training is essential to the third stage.

Unproductive Reactions:

I give up. Maybe I think I'm too weak, or others just don't understand. If I do things the same old way, maybe I'll have better luck next time. *Why should I hang in there?* Indeed. Maybe they were only half listening. Maybe they have an investment in my remaining as I've been. Maybe my self-presentation, having been unexpected, was unclear to them. What if I have their attention, and can lay out what I want from them, and say what I'm prepared to do to encourage their doing as I hope they will?---and it still doesn't happen? Some people need me, and care what happens to me. But there may be others who'd be glad to be rid of me, and would say so, if they dared. But is getting out the only answer? After all, who needs them? But what if I do, at least a little? They remember who I was, before my role transition, not who I am now. Perhaps I may show them there is a new me. If that fails, at least I've tried. I've given them the chance to know who or what they are saying 'no' to. Now if they know, and the answer is still 'no,' it's their loss, isn't it?

Suggestions for Directors

1) We may focus on current interaction with the long term people in our lives, and compare these with the interaction with the new people in our lives, including professionals and peers in the residential treatment setting.

2) This will shore up our self-presentation and heighten awareness. We must resolve to not let life stonewall us or steam-roll over us. We should solicit and hear out feedback, and balance it over against other feedback. Never rely on too few sources. How to make new roles stick? Directors help protagonists explore how new roles fit in with life, and provide practice in integration. Newcomers in our lives usually take us as we seem. They will update initial impressions if performances don't resemble billing, but consistency gets their attention. The truly good in life is abundant. Sharing in no way diminishes the supply. Indeed, it increases it.

Those among us directing psychodrama at residential treatment settings may construe work with inpatients who stay long enough to be protagonist more than once, or come back frequently, as

1. *entry* drama analogous to role transition, stage 1, **Role Fatigue**,
2. mid-hospitalization dramas, stage 2, **Role Exploration**, and to
3. prepare for leaving *exit* drama, stage 3, **Role Transformation**.

Our perspective may be applied to outpatient and private practice settings too. We substitute time markers for the inside/outside distinction. So stage one is the **baseline** exhausted as treatment begins, stage two comprises the **climactic sessions of catharsis and insight**, and stage three provides the working through and practical planning for life beyond therapy.

A Role Transition Presentation

When I offered a seminar on role transition at a recent ASGPP conference, I did a warm-up you may wish to try sometime. About twenty persons came. Some were working toward certification, and others had already reached the practitioner level. All were experienced in psychodrama. There was no need to review the method. I introduce myself, then say,

The Warmup

"In a moment we'll find out who you are, but first I'll tell you how I usually work. I shall take responsibility for structuring our session, but within that structure your input is welcome. I show, then tell. I believe that our best learning takes place as we involve ourselves with each other. We aim to develop a sense of community which opens doors for all those willing to participate, so that what we do here should be directly applicable to your treatment groups back home. What do you want us to call you? What does that name make you think of? What two words identify you today?" That done, I seek to discover *Where in the role transition process are they?* with questions like these

- 1) *What isn't working? Are you*
- 2) *separated from someone or something that used to work for you?*
- 3) *Do you feel lost? Are you not quite sure what route to take?*
- 4) *If you've committed yourself to a new role, how do you feel about it now? How is it working out?*

Don't answer yet. You're going to have an opportunity to share your answers with each other, as they come up naturally within this group warm-up.

Everyone stand. I want you to distribute yourselves as evenly as possible to the four corners of this room. That means about five persons to each corner. You'll learn more if you seek out persons you do not already know. If a corner has too many people, let latecomers go to that corner which needs more people. We're going to explore your time line in terms of

1) way back long ago, 2) recently, 3) the next step ahead, 4) what you see coming over the long haul. The four points are **way back, back, ahead, and way ahead**.

Where you are now is your **way back corner**. You have five minutes to tell one another how it was for you back then. You'll need to move along quickly to give everyone a chance to speak."

Five minutes pass.

"I'm sorry to have to call 'time,' but we've a lot of ground to cover. I want each group to move clockwise to the next corner. If you're facing the center, that will be to your left. This new corner for your group is the **back corner**. Tell one another the important role you've played recently. How has that been for you? Again, you have just five minutes to get around your subgroup."

Five minutes pass.

"By now you have caught on to where we're going. So once again let the groups move clockwise to your **ahead corner**. Take five minutes to tell one another what's coming up for you right now, and how you feel about it."

Five minutes pass.

"Let the groups move clockwise to your final destination, your **way ahead corner**. You have five minutes to tell one another how you believe it will all work out, and how you feel about that."

Five minutes pass.

"Let the groups move clockwise to return to the corner from which you started, what is the 'way back corner' for you. Your task is to choose one person as protagonist candidate. Choose two if you cannot decide between two lively possibilities. Raise your hands when you've decided. (In this way the groups all know how the other groups are moving along. It prompts them to make quick decisions, which serves the purpose of our exercise better). When all the groups are done, I say

"Return to where you began today's session. Let's have the possible protagonists come forward to stand facing the group in a straight row about here. **(I indicate the middle of the room to allow for space behind them)**.

"Each person tell us what you'd work on if you were protagonist. If someone from your group wants to add a comment which may help us make up our minds, do so in a single sentence, but first raise your hand and get the protagonist candidate's consent.

"Now that we've heard from all the candidates, let's have the candidates --- no one else-- close their eyes. You in the audience with your eyes open, stand behind your first choice for protagonist.

(Meanwhile I move into the space the group has left. Now I face the protagonist candidates and the group which has distributed themselves behind them). I say,

"The one with a slight plurality may not be the final choice for the whole group, so I ask for your total silence in considering each possibility as we reach group consensus.

Here's the procedure I follow to get the whole group behind one person. I gesture to those behind the person with the least support to stand behind someone else. I take the hand of that candidate and lead him or her to the rear, indicating you are to choose among those who remain. I follow this same process of elimination till one candidate has widespread support.

Then I send those backing the 'runner up,' together with the 'runner up,' to stand behind the group's choice for protagonist. I tell the protagonist to open his or her eyes to see all the back up.

The group returns to their seats and we begin the action portion of the psychodrama.

In the unlikely instance of a tie, I stop the process, let the two decide between themselves who should go first. Then I'll look at the clock to see whether there's time for two. If not, I'll promise a private session with the one to go second. Or, if they prefer, I'll decide for the group and give a plausible reason, based on my reaction to the person chosen as the one who needs attention right now. I'll ask the group if they agree. Normally they do.

We shall summarize the psychodrama process and minimize the content to protect the identity of the protagonist. At this late date the only ones who could guess who this is will be persons who were there, and who are, therefore, already partners to confidentiality.

Action

This is a young man who is about to move from upstate to the big city, which seems to be required for him to progress in his vocation. His question, "Will my wife like it? Will she come with me? She has a lot of personal ties where we live now."

1. Director: "Show us the place where you're living. Take us from an outside view through the door to the room within where the action takes place." He shows us the kitchen, and I interview him-as-her. Then he selects an auxiliary to play his wife. She is working on the stir fry. He senses she's irritated with him. Once the issue has become clear, I cut the scene.

2. She is pregnant. He also has a creative work in process. I designated a chair at one wall as that baby, and a chair at the opposite wall as his creative work. We represented each with auxiliaries.

He role reversed with the unborn baby to which I gave the power of understanding and speech, then reversed him back to himself at the center of the room. We did the same with the creative work.

Then the two polar auxiliaries each took an arm and applied pressure to see which way he'd yield. One auxiliary was so involved she couldn't continue and had to be replaced. I promised to be with her afterwards along with anyone else she trusted.

3. I dismissed the polar auxiliaries without requiring a decision from the protagonist. Enough to heighten his tension. Then we brought the wife auxiliary center stage seated her facing him. Using role reversals as needed, but otherwise trusting improvisations, I had each tell the other what one wanted from the other and what concession one was willing to make to obtain it. The protagonist had a hard time seeing things from his wife's point of view. Finally he told her that he loved her, after their fears had been accepted.

4. We did a future projection of the protagonist and his wife going somewhere in a car, when he told her what took place in his psychodrama at the conference. We heard what he believed would be the resolution.

Sharing

The group was totally with him. When he and the wife auxiliary spontaneously stood and embraced, I invited the whole group in to share nonverbally. Then they returned to their seats for verbal sharing, which went on and on and on. I had to break in and insist on deroling before I could let the group go.

Recapitulation

We've presented a structure for what is already being done as psychodrama without depending on frames-of-reference embedded in the medical model or in those personality theories which fail to take interaction as the fundamental unit of analysis. We are not prepared to jettison all traditional psychiatric and psychological models, but we offer what we believe to be more inclusive alternatives to broaden the base of our art. Symbolic interactionist social psychology, comparative and historical religion, but most of all theater, novels and the media have been especially helpful. Generic sequences, such as those the 'Hero's Journey' suggest and role transition metaphors, guide us. Our regular practice restores, provides, explores and establishes contexts.

The '28 plot 24 story' system shows the range of contexts drama therapies and psychodramas typically take, and each of these plots suggest a role family. We seek to integrate our protagonists into reality and reality into our protagonists. This requires that we master context and process, orchestrating protagonist-antagonist interactions such that troublesome triangles move into series of dyads, which manageable focus leads from decision in action on stage, through reconsideration on the basis of what's happened there, to action forward in life.

Remember the three stages of role transitions:

1. ROLE FATIGUE, where the old roles no longer work.
2. ROLE EXPLORATION, where we are in the process of finally letting go the old and searching around for an adequate alternative. Ideally the community provides enough patient support to let the protagonist do this well.
3. ROLE TRANSFORMATION, which begins when one is committed to a new role constellation and has received encouraging confirmation in it.

This trichotomy approximates Moreno's flow from conserve to spontaneity to creativity.

We encourage you to identify role transitions in your own life, so that you may recognize them more readily in the lives of others, to serve them better.

I recommend earliest memories as group warmup, When we go round the group asking people to tell who they are, they are inclined to mention job, address, or group affiliation. This reflects and reaffirms the stereotypes people have brought with them, and contributes to pecking order reruns. One may sink into a habitual comfort zone without risking self-disclosure. But early memories circumvent status trappings, are fun to hear, and open the door to being who we really are. This invites sharing, the *sine qua non* for workshops that do anything worthwhile.

I've outlined my self-presentation of a life time spiritual odyssey below in the hope you may find a sufficient basis for identification to justify your effort. What occurs to you as strange may offer insight into others who have puzzled you. I believe every human being is unique, and at the same time has something in common with every other human being.

Don Miller, PhD.