

IS THIS SOCIODRAMA OR CULTURE DRAMA?

We distinguishing between sociodrama and culture drama in terms of the frame of reference of those participating in the session. When we are up close, as within a business or a school or a social organization within the mainstream we are normally dealing with persons of whatever race who share the same mainstream outlook.

In the founding of Johnston College we used encounter group processes. The idea was to get the charter faculty (including our families) distributed randomly throughout the 'get-to-know-one-another' event---which after the first week was supposed to continue on a once a week basis. It was an experiment, and ours was to be an experimental college.

This was at the close of the 1960's in southern California, so we tampered with the random process by making sure that the Blacks (as they called themselves then) were spread throughout the ten groups. But after the first days our eight blacks formed their own encounter group, withdrawing from their original placements. My psychological analysis then was that they were not secure in their personal identities and required the presence of persons like themselves likely to have similar histories within mainstream America. Our non-black faculty and students were aggressively non-racist, but the blacks were not fully convinced that deep down inside us we were not like the rest of the dominant mainstream.

Today, some 44 years later, I don't think that analysis was necessarily incorrect, but that it lacked a clear perception of the social level, which would be appropriately handled by a sociodrama. The blacks were not so concerned as individuals with their personal identities as with their inclusion equally within mainstream America. They understood the dominant culture, identified with it---they were not contending so much against "freedom and the American way" as their admission into it. Who can blame them. What actually happened was that over the academic year the black encounter group disappeared and as individuals they found themselves grouping on other bases than race. Indeed, in less than a year only two of the ten groups survived, headed by the two psychology faculty members we had then, becoming group therapy. We would have profited from a sociodrama early on.

Recently I joined with a colleague on transcending ethnic barriers within the Catholic church. There was no conspicuous contention of this population with neither mainstream American culture nor even with one another as distinguishable ethnic groups. We wanted to facilitate movement within the Catholic Church whereby ethnic backgrounds would not exist as an obstacle to personal growth and fulfillment within the Catholic world perspective. In this current process as compared with the one 44 years ago our focus seemed different. The ethnic groups were already secure within their specific traditions. It was more to understand and get along with those whose traditions were not quite as familiar to them as they had thought they were. Often people used words, thinking they were universally understood and accepted, without realizing that those same words held other meanings for different ethnic groups. Through noting and accepting the nuances communication among the participating Catholics improved.

We thought of this as culture drama. We were not trying to make people conform to a mainstream which failed to 'reverse roles'. I see the problem as having been how to do this. The common danger is that we'd presume that our specific tradition was shared by others without realizing 'they' were not as much like 'us' as we had presumed they were. If we knew the variations and accepted them without insisting that our way was the right way, then we would have surely transcended the barriers. The key here is realizing our particular view cannot serve as the common standard for everyone. If we truly accept other views equipotent with ours then the goal of culture drama has been achieved. But this is not the same as sociodrama.

There is a nagging intellectual problem, however: how can the leaders of culture drama ever get outside their own cultural presuppositions. We can't. It leads to an infinite regress.

This is a problem for all science. The scientific experiment requires that the experimenter stand outside the experiment as a disinterested observer, quite as willing for his null hypotheses to be accepted as rejected. I doubt whether science as we know it can transcend that horizon. To show that this is not the only possibility, I set forth a contrast. Faith takes the observer down from the balcony into the arena. Here I speak from within my life 'experiment' with no available exit except secular non-faith. But that's the problem. How can one take such a perspective without violating the conditions of faith? One suggestion taken from theater and from reading novels, the suspension of disbelief and enjoying where it takes us. Of course we complete the theater exposure and the novel comes to an end, but according to faith the suspension of disbelief cannot continue and still be faith. The theologian Paul Tillich says doubt is not the opposite of faith, despair is. Doubt (temporary disbelief) is evidence of my ultimate concern, a way station, not a perpetual destiny.

In summary.. When we deal with race relations in America, for example, we presume a common frame of reference, mainstream America. We know there are some minor variations between Blacks and Whites, but we take for granted the dominant assumptions and values are well understood and acceptable to both. When we do cultural drama we do not make that assumption in groups which are not yet assimilated to the American way. So it appears to be a matter of degree. Here is a fictional, and a hope believable, sociodrama or cultural drama (Which?) to lead, we hope, to a more precise formulation of the definitions we've been using.

One of Us

A third generation Japanese immigrant has been married to a Caucasian Jew, and they have two children, but the woman has lost her husband though carbon monoxide poisoning. They have just moved into a rural, but informed community immediately outside suburbia. The participants welcome the newcomer, and are trying to help her though her distressing loss. The first step in going about it follows. We expect to use psychodrama, but first we must do sociodrama--- or is it culture drama?

Nick, whom you're about to meet as the director, consults the coroner. Sadie, what is your medical opinion---off the record, of course. What is it that gives you pause?"

"The irony. Some supernaturalists would call it a curse. I'm sure everyone remembers how Sam Stone came to live in our midst. Harry brought Grace and the two children here as refugees from one of our Forest Fire burnouts. Husband pilot Sam Stone was overseas waiting his turn to ferry passengers from Heathrow, Britain, back here. Grace and Joey especially, and to a lesser extent, elder daughter Becky and Harry, himself were victims of smoke inhalation and carbon monoxide poisoning, but we saved them. Late last night or early this morning Sam Stone died of carbon monoxide poisoning, mere hours after piloting a sold-out plane across the ocean, to accommodate the airline. Sam had to give up his own Thanksgiving weekend vacation with his wife's parents at Sunset Shores. I hate coincidences, but there you are. We'll do an autopsy for time of death."

"From all I've seen and heard so far this sounds like accidental death. Any reason to suspect otherwise?"

"If your investigation fails to come up with anything suspicious, I could, as coroner, certify 'accidental death' and put through the paperwork. I may do an inquest to satisfy the community and to put the matter to rest, but I'm in no hurry to convene it. (she laughs) Not after some of the inquests we've had here. You know all about those."

"Incidentally, Mrs. Stone is here this very moment, being examined by my colleague (and husband) Dr. Homer Hitt."

"Sounds like a good idea. But it would be gauche to meet her under these conditions."

"She made the appointment before all this happened. I'm surprised she's following though today anyway. An unrelated matter no doubt."

"No doubt." And that's how we left it---for a while.

The protagonist's name is Grace, the 'victim' is Sam Stone, the director is Nick Capel.

Social Context

Grace Stone was drawn to Bishop Nate Nagasaki, and he to her. Grace reminded him of his honorary niece, Patti Sterling, who is one of the easiest persons in the world to like, though for her sister Cass it was an uphill battle. They competed over the late Jason Sterling. Patti won him for a time, but lost him to Cass. Then Cass lost him forever.

When Nate remembered Sam, he flashed on the image of the late Jason Sterling, handsome and debonair, whose very presence brought women out of the woodwork. Pastor Nick Capel was Nate's protegee. Though Anglo, he came out of the Japanese-American church. His pastor Nate was elected bishop, and in his new role Nate assigned Nick here, where he's been ever since.

When he shared his parallels with Nick, Nick replied, "Of course, each is a perfect fit. You're thinking like a psychodrama director, finding the right auxiliaries to play the roles of important people in the protagonist's life. And our protagonist will be Grace Stone, who needs what we can offer her through dramatic action.

"We have our work cut out for us, for the local Japanese community has to be convinced before we can approach Grace with our plan. Psychodrama scares Anglo, and it scares Nisei and San-ci Japanese even more. People associate psychodrama with the Alfred Hitchcock film 'Psycho,' which features a deranged killer, quite a bizarre connection, but the general public remains naive, which is hardly unusual for the public. Psychodrama initially emerged as an action method for healing, and especially the medical and psychology professionals never learned that the therapy model was unnecessary,

"Indeed, a growth model works better. Far from being restricted to psychiatric patients, the better put together a person is, the more one stands to gain in participating.

"To limit Grace's exposure to the small group in Woodhaven most likely to help her, let's agree that this is to be a project of the Japanese alone, for we're not yet ready to take on the scrutiny of the larger public. We bill it as a private showing, attendance by invitation only, for the very good reason we do it in Japanese. This excludes Grace's children, who haven't learned the language---probably just as well anyway. But we can't keep out Harry, whose prompt response saved their lives, though his Japanese vocabulary consists of only two hundred words. Nate, you check but I predict Grace won't do it unless Harry is there with her."

Nearly everyone had seen Nick Capel direct psychodrama in English, with a slight venture into Italian, but always from a Western European cultural background, never presuming an Asian context. Nick was to face an informed critical audience, who would never embarrass him in public, but who'd mention privately afterwards where he'd gone wrong. They're polite. Nick can take it.

Nate checked with Grace who, as we anticipated requires his being there with her. Besides, Harry is ideal as Grace's double. He'll represent her feeling and depend on her to correct him. She does this in English, and then supplies the Japanese. Harry transcends the gap because he can repeat back a whole Japanese sentence he couldn't translate, which is a phenomenal ability in itself, not rare, but infrequently found. He is in tune with her feeling, which gives her the basic support she needs.

(We do not take for granted that you, the reader, are familiar with our method, so we'll teach you as we go along. We have to do this for Grace, the protagonist, so that you and the protagonist will learn together. When there may be some ambiguity where a ploy Nick uses ends and another begins, we'll number those. Also in the midst of observable interaction we may supply information in parentheses you may need, but those participating already know, just as we do here. But before we can continue we must provide just a little more local background).

Nick Capel had ten years experience as a crime reporter at the Coastal Chronicle before

becoming Woodhaven's Community Church pastor. He was married to Ginger at the time, who reveled in and shared that risky, exciting life. Urban products, they didn't expect to stay here very long in a sheltered, out of the way place like Woodhaven. Stereotypes can be misleading, and their old and new life merged, for Woodhaven is hardly that remote, its beautiful falls being a tourist attraction. In addition we have two "industries." At town center, between lower and upper Woodhaven, as one climbs a thousand feet along an active creek, there is a Christian Conference Center which grantees a steady flow of week and weekenders from all over southern California.

Accounting for the prominent Japanese presence. we have Kaga Tsu, the second vice-president of Cruze International, responsible for the flow of export and import Japanese cars for Western USA, who lives here, and manages an administrative office, and also a busy sales and service complex. His sister Nariko has recently married Bishop Nagasaki, who retired next door. Bert and Betty Brent, long term staff, who wandered off to 'Milano, Italia' for a few years, have returned 'home' at last. Nate is Christian but the others are Buddhists, except Betty who is Moslem. It may be the size of many rural communities, but hardly typical.

Aside from the Christian Conference dining room, the town's guests may dine at Vincent Sterling's natural food deli and grocery---a favorite local hangout, or where we are now, the Alpine Fire-Tower gourmet Italian and French restaurant, which pulls in regular customers all the way from Los Angeles to Palm Springs.

Another significant out-of-town link comes through the police. Captain Shaughnessy, in charge of the adjacent police department at Foothill, as a single father, raised his daughter Ginger (as if she were a son) as he rose through the ranks of the urban police system. He was pleased that she married successful crime reporter Nick Capel at the time, and all went well for many years. But under the influence of the Rev. Nathaniel Nagasaki at the Japanese-American church Nick dropped crime for the gospel, When Nate was elected bishop, he got Nick out of a transition problem by moving them to Woodhaven Community Church, where they've been ever since.

The marriage suffered. Ginger enjoyed taxi-cabbing all over the LA area. A country town was the last place she wanted to be. The bishop mandated marriage counseling with Jewish psychologist Luke Freeman.

That combined with an apparent crime wave in Woodhaven involving them and their friends, from which they had to extricate themselves, brought the couple back together. In the process the retiring local chief chose Ginger as his replacement. Now both Capels had a solid reason for staying here together. Church and community never lost faith in them.

Meanwhile the highly respected Captain Shaughnessy was transferred to the suburban Foothill police department adjoining Woodhaven as their new chief, bringing father and daughter closer together in a common cause than they'd been in years. This barely scratches the surface of the interconnections which prevail here to provide support for the suffering Stones.

On Site: Everyone there had occasion to dine at Mario Manetti's scenic Alpine restaurant, six stories high in what once had been a fire-tower for the National Forest Service, but it was day-off Monday as day was dying, where the scenery becomes indoor polished wood plush, but not distracting. We pushed the tables to the East wall, chairs in front of them, facing Westward toward the setting sun, soon gone. In making an introduction Bishop Nagasaki describes psychodrama as a form of group therapy which takes a person the next step forward, to showing the story rather than merely telling it. To rely on free action we bypass cool intellectual discourse which falls short of a warm climate where emotional repair happens.

The bishop waxes eloquent in praise of the psycho-drama director, but Nick interrupts, saying "The bishop has gone Western," to an amused group, showing shy smiles.

The session begins

Media entertainment audience participation is no side-show but our main resource. No place for passivity here. Our protagonist does the work, while all of us work with her and for her." Though

the language spoken was Japanese, the session progressed as smoothly as it would've in English.

Nick designated where in the room the stage is, choosing a large brightly colored oriental rug on top of the neutral wall-to-wall carpeted floor. "Anything not on stage is off-stage," he said. "We'd like a theater, of course, so we have to pretend this is it. We'll do a lot of pretending tonight, to discover what is really so. This is a paradox, not a contradiction. We pretend in order to disclose the truth. We tell when you're to play someone other than yourself.

1. Show relationships between pairs within the group: "It wouldn't be fair to expect Grace to open herself up to us unless we show our willingness to open ourselves up to her. I set two chairs before you at right angles to each other downstage so that you may interact and include the rest of us simultaneously. In less than five minutes your task is to discover and share what your relationship means to each other. Be up-to-date, tell Grace how you feel at being with her tonight.

Knowing the rapport Grace and the bishop had already reached, I invited Nate and Nariko to go first. Both indicated they felt like honorary grandparents to Grace. From the audience Grace responded with a few sentences to each pair. She identified Nate as very like grandfather Ishida, whose 90th birthday they celebrated in Sunset Shores on Thanksgiving vacation.

Next came Bert and Betty Brent. Grace listened intently for Bert was an Anglo Buddhist and Betty a Moslem, both admittedly marginal in ordinary society. They showed no trace of partisanship toward others in their individual identities, showing rather a pleasant outgoing relationships with a world which didn't understand the basis for their togetherness, but were willing to learn. Grace saw Bert as a bit like her late husband Sam, which perception was more accurate than she realized.

The last of three selections was the recently married Daphne Owen, daughter of the American missionary to Japan, and Daphne's daughter Patti, Nate's honorary niece. Both are Anglo Christians, with deep appreciation of Japanese culture and religion.

Here was a mother-daughter relationship Grace wished she'd enjoyed with her own mother Susan. Also they had totally lost their ancestral family in the American atomic bombing of Nagasaki at the close of World War 2.

Grace also admitted she identified with both Betty and Patti as individuals, and wanted to come across to others just like they did. No one said so, but it was obvious to anyone that Grace was more than half way there, for any photograph of the three together would display all three as exceptionally beautiful women.

Then Nick invited Kaga as the one person who'd not yet been represented to get personally acquainted with Grace. They were to take turns finding out something personal about each other, that few other persons know.

Harry had explained doubling to Grace beforehand, so that she was not taken by surprise. People who had been in psychodrama before took doubling in stride, for they had seen its value. Newcomers were annoyed and puzzled at Harry's behavior. Not that he was wrong, but so many times he was right. For them that was impolite, and a problem, for one must save face.

(One must avoid humiliation, for that means one does not belong in this group right now. In extreme situations one apologizes for being who he has been---and simultaneously accuses 'humiliators'--- through ritual suicide. A thing of the past, but it lingers somewhere deep inside).

2. Doubling: "I see the pain on some faces, so I owe you an explanation. We risk saying out loud the kind of thing we say silently within ourselves. Harry is there to help Grace discover what goes on in her. Here's how it works.

Grace takes in how one presents herself, while Harry concentrates on how Grace receives the self-presentation. that is, the feeling it may call forth in her. Harry will imagine himself as if he were Grace, and speak out as if he were Grace, on anything her body shows but she doesn't acknowledge in words. He's not Japanese, so we don't expect him to be as polite as you may be.

He's ready to admit he could be wrong. Grace, when he hits the nail on the head you come out a little bit stronger, and when he's all wrong, you let him know immediately and give him the English phrase which is better. He'll come up with the correct version at once, maybe elaborate

on it. He wants to help you to be you. You've responded to him in English, to keep him on track.

Grace, tell Harry how you feel about his doubling you, and then tell him why you insisted he be in this meeting with you, even though he doesn't speak Japanese.

And Harry, respond to what she says to you." They did so, and ended with a spontaneous embrace, which embarrassed both of them, a little.

"I staged this to let you know that the double does not criticize or blame anyone, least of all the protagonist. He's not there to tear anyone down, but to build them up. And it is our belief we do this where we're honest with ourselves and with others. This does not drive us away, but lets us come closer. You'll see enough here to decide for yourselves. Regardless of your conclusion, letting other persons be who they are lets you to give yourself permission to be who you are."

3. Including unavailable persons: "Now Grace, your children cannot speak Japanese, so of course, we'll do this in English. Here are two empty chairs facing each other. We'll have two persons each behind a chair to remind us who we're imaging there. Harry, you stand behind the Becky chair, and Kaga, you stand behind the Joey chair. Grace, you are to slip back and forth between the chairs showing how they interact with each other. You can mimic something you remember or make up some-thing new, as you wish." She does so.

"Now that the scene is done, Harry, tell Grace what it's like to be Becky in this brother-sister relationship. and then, Kaga tell Joey's mother what it's like being Joey.

We saw a charming and believable model of the children's relationship with each other.

"Grace, tell them what you learned from this exercise."

We listened and then, a question from the audience. "Grace, how is it that you aren't speaking Japanese with your children?"

"I feel guilty about that, but Sam, the father of the children doesn't---didn't, excuse me, speak Japanese --- he felt he was too old to learn another language, I guess. He already spoke a little Hebrew, and some French German. Since we live in southern California, he thought Spanish should be next, but he never got around to it."

Harry doubled, "I feel your criticism and it hurts."

Grace comments, "Yes, it hurts, because I was not as pushy as I could've been. But he was away so much, it would've taken a long time for him to get satisfaction from achieving it. The kids would show him up and he'd have been embarrassed. As for how I feel about your asking, if our places were reversed, I'd have asked too. I didn't for moment feel you'd already judged me. Your question shows you interest in getting to know me, and I deeply appreciate that."

Harry doubled, "I'm pleased at your participation, and hope that you don't feel I've been touchy."

Grace repeated what her double said. in Japanese.

The inquirer smiled and said, in English, "Thank you."

Nick speaking, "You note that Grace had to be capable of doubling for her children. In that way she could take the role of each through they are not here. But she made them present."

"Think of how powerful this action method is. In the right kind of setting, like this one, we can present anyone we know fairly well, and even those we don't know at all. Actors, especially method actors, do this professionally. But here we do it better, because we care about the people we represent, and our reputation is not at stake. As we enact difficult situations we often happen on a solution which may never occur to us otherwise. Not only that, we may anticipate as situation in action, and make more realistic choices."

Sharing: Nick faced the group: "Everyone stand and let us make a circle. My purpose now is to give you an opportunity to present yourself as you want Grace to see you. Give Grace entrance to a part of you it would take a year for her to grasp otherwise. We'll have each person give his

present reaction to what we've done and how you feel about each other. A few minutes from each person should do it. I seek to create a sense of belongingness in Grace as the newcomer here, which is the sort of atmosphere she needs to enter into the very difficult territory we'll face together today.

That done, we took a twenty minute break for tea, snacks, and phone calls to persons with us in spirit even though they couldn't make it in person.

Grace called Jayle who was baby sitting with her children and spoke with each of them. Harry called his sister Sadie and good friend Hiram. Patti called her husband Vincent, and her sister Cassandra. I called Ginger. Daphne called her husband Ed.

Everyone wished us well.

This is the place where you may expect me to provide the right answer to the questions raised at the beginning. But my goal here is to provoke discussion, not to do your thinking for you. After discussing the matter together, we'll be better prepared to meet such expectations.

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