

TERMS

WHAT IS THE OPEN STORY SYSTEM?

At *Spirituality and Culture* our approach to action methods is Dr. Donell Miller's "Open Story System." Action methods are inherent to the story system. The plot driving our personal narrative is usually hidden from us, even as cultural themes are hidden from the group. When our life story goes awry, loses direction through confusion, anxiety, fear, betrayal, abandonment, grief, anger or vengeance, there is the need for redirection—for nurturing, healing, being uplifted and reconnected. But this is not easily achieved when our deepest motives are hidden from us, when the inner voice of wisdom is muted and our life compass obscured. Advice and services may be offered to us; but to no avail. Life continues, stuck in a revolving track like a broken record leading nowhere, until we find the foothold—the plot, the "why"—at the heart of our story. How do we discover it? Through action!

J.L. Moreno (1889-1974) discovered that the way forward for individuals and society as a whole can be achieved most effectively by means of dramatic action. Within a secure group environment, by speaking and showing our individual "truth" through dramatic action, we can explore the depths of our narrative and uncover the inner plot. As the enactment follows the story line—namely the who, what, when, where and how of the narrative, including the doubts, anxieties, fears, frustrations and anger involved in addition to the accomplishments, joys and hopes—a plot to the story line, the "why", emerges.

We can only begin to take charge of our narrative after the "why" is uncovered. Once we become aware of the plot directing our story the necessary steps to alter our destiny can be taken. We can then remove the impediments to growth, envision a new, more fulfilling narrative, and learn and rehearse the new roles associated with it. In this way we can create new ways of being to achieve our full human potential. As we go through this process we also come to experience a deeper connection with and appreciation of self and the significant other.

Action methods are good for therapy, but they are also good for facilitating wellness, maturity and spiritual growth in individuals or groups. Here the story line details the successes, hopes and joys of the protagonist or the group as potential for further growth. Whether it is for therapy or for personal growth, the basic process is the same—discover the plot and change the story through action.

WHAT ARE ACTION METHODS?

Action methods are therapeutic, healing and wellness processes that involve dramatic action and the participation of a group in a confidential, secure and supportive atmosphere. The group includes a director, an audience, a protagonist who is chosen from the audience, and a stage where the action takes place under the supervision of

the director. A standard 2-3 hour session consists of three parts: First, the warm-up to increase the group's spontaneity and creativity; then the "action" segment which features one or more protagonists acting out the "truth" of their life situation on stage. This is what differentiates action methods from improvisation and other forms of drama. Finally, there is a "sharing" in which the group, in support of the protagonist(s), shares their inner experience of the drama. Action methods can be applied to many different situations and issues. Psychodrama and group psychotherapy are usually therapeutic and are used for mental health, personality integration, dependency recovery, or family issues; but together with bibliodrama they can also be used more broadly for personal growth, maturation and spiritual development. Sociometry, sociodrama and culture-drama, on the other hand, are used for exploring and dealing with collective social and cultural issues through action. Here the group itself is the protagonist.

WHAT IS PSYCHODRAMA?

J.L. Moreno, the originator of psychodrama, defined it as the science which explores the "truth" by dramatic methods. It "deals with interpersonal relations and private worlds." By truth, Moreno means the personal truth of the protagonist, the subject of a psychodrama. We all live in the same world, yet each of us has our own personal experience of it. Although there is enough general agreement concerning the nature of the world to convince us that we share a common universe, we each experience it and interpret it a little differently. Moreno's "truth" refers to each person's unique perception of the world, of one's place in it and one's relationships with others who co-create this world.

These relationships are the most important aspect of our world. Psychodrama makes them explicit. It uncovers the internal perceptions, memories, thoughts, emotions, fantasies, dreams, even hallucinations and delusions, giving all these tangible form on the psychodramatic stage. The audience is then able to perceive in a physical, concrete way this inner world; and, with the help of the director and "auxiliary egos", the protagonist is able to explore his/her relationships in detail. This generally results in an enlarged and altered perception of the protagonist's world, themselves and their significant others in ways that make sense out of what was up to this point unexplainable. In short, psychodrama permits us to explore our worlds and learn more about ourselves, our significant others and our relationships with them.

The psychodramatic method is a way of looking at and understanding subjective human experience. It includes a number of techniques which permit us to re-visit and re-enact past experiences, examine current relationships, and explore dreams, fantasies and our expectations of what the future may bring. The director of the psychodrama serves as guide, technician and prompter, helping the protagonist identify important internal processes and produce them in dramatic form. Members of the group help out as auxiliary egos or stand-ins for absent significant others. The method is systematic which means that it can be taught and learned. It is not magical; nor is the director a magician.

Although psychodrama is usually considered to be a form of psychotherapy, and has been most widely applied in the mental health fields, psychotherapy is only one of its many functions. It is also a powerful method for teaching and training, for engendering spontaneity and creativity, for conducting research, and it is also a playful art form, a true version of drama.

WHAT IS SOCIOMETRY?

Sociometry is a method for uncovering through action the underlying structure of a group—those innate attractions, antipathies and neutralities we have for one another in communities, family and the workplace. Questions are posed to participants such as “who in this group would you like to know? Go to that person and put your hand on his/her shoulder.” Within a short time the unspoken relations between the members of the group are dramatically mapped out. These silent configurations are at the heart of a group’s working relations. They can foster the wellbeing of the group or they can seriously undermine its wellbeing and working effectiveness. Once participants are aware of these patterns, they can be helped to modify their connections in ways that will minimize conflict, maximize communication and restructure the group for harmonious interaction, respect and mutual support.

WHAT IS SOCIODRAMA?

Sociodrama is an action method that examines collective issues or themes and provides practice in solving problems of human relations in a safe and supportive environment. It is a living laboratory for a group to securely practice new and more satisfying ways to approach problems, explore values, express feelings and try on new behaviors. Unlike psychodrama, in sociodrama it is the group narrative rather than an individual’s personal story that is in focus. With the group as protagonist, sociodrama highlights what people have in common, and brings to the surface the thoughts and feelings, hopes and fears, conflicts and misunderstandings of the group who, through a flow of spontaneity and creativity, come to a new understanding of themselves, each other and the world around them. The impersonal group focus makes it possible to explore highly sensitive issues with greater distance and objectivity. It is an effective way to explore the highly charged issues of race, gender, politics and religion.

WHAT IS CULTURE-DRAMA?

Culture-drama is a special action method for our global age. It explores misunderstandings and conflicts between religiously and culturally diverse groups, and transforms these through action. Where sociodrama deals with groups of the same language and culture, culture-drama works with groups of different religions, languages, cultures and world-views. It expands the sphere of interaction dramatically to meet the special needs of our global era. Culture-drama promotes healthy, harmonious, intercultural and interreligious relations leading to social and global wellness. It helps groups to bridge diversity issues and develop intercultural competency. Participants use action techniques to explore and differentiate issues at three levels affecting

relationships—personality issues (different personality but same roles and culture), social issues (different personalities and roles but same culture) and intercultural issues (different personalities, roles and cultures). Within a secure environment it helps groups interacting as collective protagonists, to engage in classic encounter, uncover innate biases and stereotypes, and through various action techniques begin to see through each other's eyes and step into each other's shoes. Participants are able gain insight into their conflicting roles and try on new, more adequate roles for intercultural living. In the present here and now, they experience a deeper appreciation of self and the other as they discover and express their unrealized potential for peaceful and harmonious, intercultural relations and put into practice more interculturally adaptive behaviors.

WHAT IS BIBLIODRAMA?

Bibliodrama is a special form of sociodrama that applies action methods to written or oral texts, especially the Bible. Through various action techniques using Biblical or other texts, the group explores thoughts and feelings, hopes and fears, individual and collective issues. The use of Biblical texts makes it especially powerful for religious and spiritual themes. By acting out Biblical scenes, God's wisdom, which can seem cold and distant, enlivens participants' understanding of themselves, each other and the world around them. It also helps them deepen their understanding of God's word as it is lived in the present moment and in the context of daily life. One's spirituality is deepened and lives are renewed as God's wisdom speaks through action. Within a secure and mutually supportive group atmosphere, participants are able to access their deepest connection with the Spirit as God's action in our lives becomes palpable through our interaction with others. The group's nurturing touch enkindles genuine concern, compassion and love of neighbor, and the freedom to practice it—live it—in everyday situations.

WHAT IS ACTION METHODS TRAINING?

Our group sessions and programs using various action methods also serve as training opportunities in such diverse fields as psychotherapy, medicine, religion, life-coaching, education, law, management and the corporate world. Our aim is to provide a better understanding of the action method processes and to increase skills for clinical practice and coaching. Our training groups offer a meeting point for professionals to gather and connect with one another, to receive support, nourishment and inspiration, and to increase their spontaneity and enthusiasm in their professional, personal and spiritual lives. The training is both didactic and experiential with time for personal exploration and skill development. Training in action method techniques is useful for working with groups, couples and individuals of all ages. Culture-drama is especially useful for professionals working with diversity issues, different culture groups or couples of mixed culture, race or ethnicity.