

## What Psychodrama Offers

Though this has been prepared for a Marriage, Family Therapist newsletter, my target audience is the professional community generally---with the exception of the psychodrama community itself, who will find my presentation lacks comprehensiveness. This is not a review for a journal, but a simple introduction for newcomers, less likely to be put off with a particular personal point-of-view.

Psychodrama is both a method and a collection of techniques. Those with a passing acquaintance easily pick up on the latter, but even though they find them convenient, they fall short of deriving the full benefit, when they haven't developed the skill to use them properly. A method includes a variety of techniques, which can be used in any context, but the method requires the strategic use of technique. I came into psychodrama trained in psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapy, which I imposed on the array of techniques. The result was gratifying, but gradually I graduated to grasping the method itself, leaving the psychodynamic behind, which got in the way of a more effective treatment.

One may begin the presentation of a discipline in the logical, systematic way we find in the typical introductory college text. but one should seek experience in a psychodrama group first. Formal instruction becomes more meaningful when one participates in multiple episodes. Our approach requires personal investment rather than objective distance.

**Description:** Psychodrama resembles a play. We set up a sequence of scenes, taking us from a story's beginning, which shows how the protagonist's attempts to cope haven't worked out, through a middle where we consider options available, to an end as we explore where taking this option or that may lead. We use a stage, a director, actors from the group, a protagonist, and an audience. The director is usually on stage with the protagonist, guiding the flow, highlighting the central conflict, and bringing the story to a satisfying resolution.

But unlike drama, the psychodrama creates its own script in accord with the protagonist's real goals and objectives. There is no rehearsal, nor a production for an audience seeking entertainment. The audience is there to give, not to get.

Psychodrama is like group therapy, where the whole group acts as therapist. The designated leader creates a climate of acceptance, where people feel free to reveal themselves without holding up an image. We provide understanding and support, while the protagonist takes himself apart and puts himself back together again---better this time.

Unlike group therapy, psychodrama puts the whole matter into its setting, always acting in the here and now, rather than merely talking about something which happened at another time or place. Psychodrama engages the feelings early on, facilitating expression and integration. With a more vivid spectacle to experience, others are in a far better position to understand and share what has happened to them, which parallels what they've just seen happen to the protagonist on stage.

So in psychodrama we function like a healthy family, providing an atmosphere which fosters growth, and gain resources for facing the world. Frequently we deal with anger, guilt and loss, work through the grieving process so that we can take up our lives again and function effectively. We face our pain, put it behind us without minimizing or passing around it, to be fully present with what comes up later.

**Definition:** Psychodrama is that professional practice which uses action based on the theory, philosophy and methodology of Jacob L. Moreno. This calls for enactment, sociometry, group dynamics, role theory, and social systems analysis to facilitate constructive change in individuals and groups through the development of new perceptions, or through

reorganization of old cognitive patterns. Our improvisations produce spontaneity, the goal toward which we strive. We move beyond ventilation, enhance awareness and gain insight leading to full integration. Through a titrated letting go we gain more effective control, whereby a self-made-whole gains the freedom to be who he or she is, whatever the situation, no longer a passive victim but one in charge of himself, reacting realistically to the situation confronting him.. Current applications include but are not limited to clinical, social, educational, creative and research activity.

**Historical:** Psychodrama is almost a hundred years old, a venerable, well-established old approach. Several modern theories, often without acknowledgement, have been built on its foundation. Psychodrama itself grew from these four roots: 1) J.L. Moreno, MD pioneered group therapy. It had its humble origin in a bordello in Vienna as a labor union. 2) Another root was a mystical religious experience involving automatic writing on the inner wall of a public health officer's study. Moreno first published those "Words of the Father" anonymously, but 12 years later acknowledged that he himself had received the gift. The germ of his philosophy has been prefigured there in surprising detail. Catholics, protestants and Jewish clerics have found much there they could identify with. 3) A major root is the theater, especially in its improvisational form. 4) Moreno's sociology underlies his whole system. He takes us beyond the individual to the community at large. His 'magnum opus, "Who Shall Survive?" published 1934, shows how the sociometry he invented reflects broad social processes and a way to measure them in practical situations. Reminiscent of Darwin and Wallace, who simultaneously arrived at similar theories, the philosopher G.H. Mead, also published in 1934, an independent view which paralleled and corroborated Moreno's. Moreno's merit was having tested out and validated the principles in action.

Both Moreno and Mead considered the relationship, not the individual, the basic unit for explanation. Psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan agreed. But not even today has this basic ground been fully appreciated, for the medical model, especially in its hospital manifestations continues with the accent on the individual. Our whole legal system likewise focuses on one individual at a time. Marriage and Family Therapists know better but still must knuckle under to the individuatic presuppositions of the medical and legal models within which we work.

**Love Story:** When Moreno came to the USA he rented a room at Carnegie Hall as a center for spontaneous theater. Persons who'd been to Broadway's theaters began to come together here, to performed on stage as they'd seen the professionals do, but without a script to follow. The same crowd kept coming back. An ingenue we'll call Mary, sweet and lovely, was an audience favorite.. A regular we'll call George, a successful playwright during the day,, applauded Mary louder and longer than anyone else. They began seeing one another outside the theater. One day George came to Dr. Moreno, confessing he'd fallen in love with her, and asked the doctor whether it would be all right to court her. Moreno gave his blessing, and the couple married. They returned to their theater, and everything seemed to go on as before.

Later George spoke to Moreno privately: "I don't know what has happened to us," he said. "Mary is an angel on stage, but a devil at home. I want my old wife back." Moreno replied, "George, the time has come for you to join her on stage," which he did, with the result we had scene after scene of marital conflict. What they had done at home they did now on stage, with the unforeseen result that the home problem ceased. They matured before our very eyes. The marriage was saved.

Suddenly It occurred to Dr. Moreno that this same process was available to all, so he gave birth to psychodrama about 1925. He required a custom made theater. The original stage setting was completed 1936 at his home in Beacon, NY, sixty miles up the Hudson

River. Franchot Tone funded the theater, while Joan Crawford and Peter Lorre were among those first to use it. Moreno's motto, "Let people have their psychodrama." welcomes fantasy in action, whereby reality may take hold. He also treated the psychotic inmates of his Sanitarium there on stage nearly every day.

**Some specific applications of psychodrama:** I mention only three in which I am currently involved: 1) **Family Therapy:** I find psychodrama entirely consistent with Murray Bowen's approach. The accent on triangles suggests treatment strategy. Moreno speaks of the social atom, which we know as the family of origin, those few persons closest to us in early childhood, who become the framework of our subsequent relationships. They linger in the background of our nuclear family, integral to our identity. When triangles function properly, each of the three remains in full contact with the others. The flow of communication continues without impediment, supportive of the dyads.

But on the other hand, our response to the relationships at hand may involve dyadic fusion, with no discernable boundaries, at the expense of another relegated to the fringes. This is unstable, involving destructive competition and pain. Freud recognized this much with his oedipus complex, but he based it on the instincts, and failed to grasp its omnipresence. How often we've seen a child with a symptom for the family, or the marital bond compromised with a parent-child fusion. It doesn't end there, for a person may be at the fulcrum of more than one triangle. And the triangles cross generations. The ease with which psychodrama stages these facilitates perception and offers an avenue for attacking them directly, resolving one triangle while indirectly affecting another. On the other hand, given the limitations of the medical marketplace, where we must resort to band-aids, we may not reach full awareness, but nevertheless treat a second triangle while focusing on a first. Bowen recognized this in his preference to work on the parent generation in treating the nuclear family.

2) **Defending the Accused:** Clients typically arrive with their feelings muted, as they seek to be objective, but only succeed in justifying themselves in placing the blame on others. A few others are so caught up in their feelings the lawyer dare not put them on the witness stand, for they would only injure their defense.

The lawyer's goal is to discover the client's story, which the client himself doesn't know yet. Perhaps you've had a group experience using Russian dolls, where there are dolls successively hidden within each one. Everyone in the group receives a doll. In turn each person describes the outer layer, which also describes of the speaker's persona, the self he presents to the public. Then we remove the outer layer to reveal and present what lay directly beneath, going round the group as before. We go deeper as we uncover the next doll and the next. Groups have found this a profoundly moving experience.

The lawyer's variation on this we call 'chairback.' This is not classic psychodrama but a newly derived variation. Whereas with the Russian dolls one speaks as oneself, the lawyer's team works without the client present, but based on having had full interaction with the client previously. Here the lawyer uses himself as a instrument to discover the client's story, which he cannot yet set forth. We place one chair behind another, reminiscent of the protagonist and his double. But here we have the lawyer in the first chair, speaking as if he were the accused detailing his story to the jury. Then the lawyer moves back to the second chair where he retell the initial story. But here he tells what the accused is afraid to tell the jury. Thus the full story emerges, which the lawyer encourages the client to face and present in court. This makes emotional contact with the jury and represents the accused's best hope for a favorable outcome.

This process guides the trial lawyer in the Voir Dire. He makes personal contact with the jurors, admitting his own foibles, and encouraging them to mention their own parallel experiences to one another. The lawyer knows the facts most inimical to the case, which cannot be avoided. Accordingly he seeks out the fixed prejudices within the jurors, often leading the juror to admit he or she will have difficulty being objective. Thus the juror may disqualify himself, or the other lawyer may do it for him, leaving only a few for the defense to eliminate. Done this way, the defense lawyer tries not to dismiss any at all, for by this time, he has them more open to hearing the story of the accused..

Knowledge of the client's story allows the defense to make an opening statement which makes sense. There is an "elephant on the table," which he's already implicitly introduced in the Voir Dire, but now he comes forth with it openly, defusing the opposition's power to capitalize on it. One accepts the truth and doesn't deny it. If the accused is placed on the stand, he has not been rehearsed in what he ought to say, but through the psychodrama method has practiced being who he is, as he tells the court his own story. In developing the client's story with his team, the defense makes explicit use of typical triangles, especially one involving the betrayal of trust, leading directly to the crime.

3) **Action Methods for Spiritual Growth** is the title of the psychodrama group our church sponsors, but does not monitor, every week. A minority from the church attend, who do not see faith in the narrow sense of the word. The majority who come are professional family therapists, lawyers, and college students. The specific psychodrama which unfolds on a particular evening may not seem religious at all. Nevertheless, there is hardly any experience which doesn't have a spiritual dimension, though long alienated from organized religion. Catholics, protestants, Jews and agnostics all can function within this pluralistic context. We take the protagonist's specific faith as a given and work within that.

Typical psychodramas here have to do with the implications of injury, loss and death. Why do bad things happen to good people? Surely this is not the will of God. Accordingly we welcome direct confrontation between the believer and an empty chair where he can imagine God sitting, if God sits in a chair. When that's too hard to imagine, Christians typically choose Jesus, and when that's too much, they select their prime representative of the faith, whether it be pastor or parent. Agnostics have placed the cosmos in the empty chair. What comes out of all this is the acceptance that bad things happen, that perhaps God suffers along with us rather than visiting the suffering upon us. What remains under our control is the present and the future. Here we can work out a stand. We have the group here, who have been where we are. They proffer no cheap or easy solutions. A constructive option is to focus on 'how it happened' rather than 'why.' The Divine Being will be with us as we react to the old and move to the road ahead.

In the process we often discover that parent figures have used religion against the child to keep him in line, such that their 'God' echoes parental authority. We use the concept 'God is better than the best person I know' to point the protagonist in the direction of making faith a support rather than an impediment to functioning. Protagonists typically make this discovery themselves when they take the divine chair. Within each religion there are views implying acceptance and forgiveness, and there are ready Biblical examples of such. Using action methods we move far beyond mere talking to actual resolution.

I can amply illustrate all of the above and would welcome the opportunity to do so. Attend a psychodrama session and see for yourself. Call me (909) 798-2765

**Don Miller**