

Boundary and Flow: Max Clayton and Psychodrama in Action

JOHN FARNSWORTH

ABSTRACT

What has containment to do with the vitality of the psychodramatic method? In this article, John Farnsworth recalls a vivid demonstration by Max Clayton in 2002 of how containment and flow relate to each other. Max also raised important questions about how closely psychodrama and psychotherapy relate through these concepts. The article investigates each of these concerns, illustrating them by investigating how boundary and flow appear in different settings, whether with individuals, groups, face-to-face or online.

KEY WORDS

Containment, flow, Max Clayton, boundary, psychodrama, psychotherapy, Winnicott

Introduction

In 2002, now eleven years ago, I took part in a workshop run by Max Clayton and Chris Hosking. At one point, Max got into a disagreement with a psychotherapist in our group. Those who have worked with Max might say this wasn't so unusual. In this case, it led to a memorable moment from an insight that emerged in a short demonstration Max gave to the group.

Afterwards, Chris Hosking approached two of us and asked if we could write up the interaction. Often, she said, such moments in Max's work were lost because no-one recorded them. We agreed, but struggled to make something more of it, despite making several attempts. I know, for myself, the demonstration offered something I couldn't grasp at the time. However, the moment has stayed with me and now, eleven years later, I can finally put some flesh on the bones of the idea he presented.

What I write now may be different to what Max had in mind. Again, this is not an unfamiliar experience with him; some of his teaching was suggestive and required slow absorption rather than simple explanation. So it has been with me,

and I will cross between psychodrama and psychotherapy to develop the ideas he demonstrated as I think he meant them. I will also move from group to individual work, and from face-to-face engagements to online interaction to explore the larger ideas he developed through his enactment.

What was the focus of Max's demonstration? It moved between the ideas of flow and containment. These are common both to psychodrama and therapy, though we may not often bring either to mind. They can largely function out of awareness, but Max's demonstration brings them to the fore.

Containment is a central concern in therapeutic work. It is often related to other terms: boundary, holding or frame, and implies safety and security. Breaches of boundaries produce disruption, anxiety, confusion and uncertainty. Flow, in contrast, is closer to a state of being: an experience, sometimes an optimal one, that connects the self together or the self to others (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Both flow and boundary, flow or containment extend well beyond psychodrama as part of our experience in everyday life. The questions Max raises are how each relates to the other and how we utilize them in our work as psychodramatists.

The Demonstration

We were halfway through a training group in Auckland when a debate arose about the necessity for containment. It became intense as a psychotherapist insisted that safe therapeutic work couldn't take place without containment and boundaries, and Max repeating that it could. Finally, he said, 'I'll show you', and set out a demonstration. He began by saying that containment implied a form of leaking was taking place. To illustrate this, he called a protagonist onto the stage:

Max	Let's create containment.
Protagonist	<i>Walks over willingly to engage in the role</i>
Max	Be a spring.
Protagonist	<i>Thinks to herself:</i> Oh God, I'll just be a little bubbling spring. <i>She stands still on the spot and raises her arms a little.</i>
Max	Don't go like that on me. You don't have to stand up. Springs don't have to stand up. They can go down.
Protagonist	<i>Warms up to the role and falls onto the floor.</i> Bubble, bubble, bubble.
Max	Be the living waters.
Protagonist	<i>In a full voice</i> Bubble, bubble, bubble, I am the living waters. I am flowing out to everybody.
Max	There are two ways to begin a group. It needs to be called to order in some way so that it can gather the force necessary to focus on being a group. This doesn't require containment. What we have here is a spring that implies a flow of energy. This energy enables a warm-up to take place so that a focus develops

on the progressive and functional aspects of a role. This extends, not contains experience, and this is the difference between psychotherapy and psychodrama. In psychodrama, the development begins from the inside and works towards the outside. Containment comes from the warm-up: it means that a functional role development contains the self in its role functioning.

Max throws out a wealth of ideas in his comments, even as he is demonstrating just one of them. He links flow to energy to warm-up to functional and progressive roles. He describes how the warm-up extends, rather than contains, experience and he contrasts an idea of psychotherapy with one of psychodrama. In this, he implies psychotherapy holds experience within an individual whilst psychodrama moves outwards. That is quite a number of ideas; they become more intriguing when he also suggests containment isn't irrelevant; in fact, it comes from the warm-up.

What are we to make of all this? At the moment Max was proposing these ideas, there was little time for the group to take them in. I remember my own intrigue and involvement, but little clearly beyond this. In hindsight, however, some ideas begin to stand out.

Opening out the Demonstration

The key issue was this: what was the disagreement between psychodrama and psychotherapy that first led to this enactment? It isn't directly stated, but it's about the central notion in psychotherapy that an individual needs holding or containment. Max demonstrates this isn't so. However, Max's remarks still leave open differences between 'flow' and 'containment' as constructive experiences. This opens the issue out beyond modalities to something wider. What is flowing and what needs containment?

One clear answer relates to the alternation between spontaneity and anxiety (McVea, 2009). In the face of overwhelming anxiety, individuals fragment. A common response in psychotherapy is containment: a way of holding these disintegrating fragments together. Without containment, energy dissipates or, as Max puts it, leaks away. That possibility is present at the beginning of a group and an anxious, restricted warm-up can result. This is the second of the two ways Max suggests a group can begin, though he doesn't explicitly name it.

The unnamed alternative is spontaneity: the gathering and focusing of energy, with an outward, curious exploration, just as Max describes. For this to happen, a group 'needs to be called to order' so that it can become an increasingly integrated, energized entity. Who calls it to order? Max doesn't say but he is likely to have Moreno's thinking in mind. This relates to gathering together scattered role fragments, whether these are in an individual or a group. As

Moreno (1980: 56) writes of an infant at birth, it forms its world 'on the basis of small and weakly related zones, scattered unevenly over the body.' Each zone 'is the focal point of a physical starter in the process of warming up to a spontaneous actuality state — such state or states being components in the shaping of a role'. The coalescing role takes place in the presence of a warm auxiliary other; in the case of a group, the director as an auxiliary ego.

This might seem to close the issue, by emphasising the high value of a flow in warm-up and spontaneity. Yet, this is where the complexity of Max's thinking becomes evident. He brings back the idea of containment: 'containment comes from the warm-up', not just flow, and the warm-up itself 'contains the self in its role fragments'. Containment, far from being banished as a cautious therapeutic concern, suddenly takes its place by contributing to the flow of gathering spontaneity. How can this be?

Flow and Containment

Flow and containment are both intrinsic to Max's original demonstration. They are also intrinsic to the psychodramatic method as a whole. In the demonstration, the image is a bubbling spring. A moment's thought reminds us that a spring, or any tributary, is contained by its banks. Without them, the energy of the water flow seeps away into the surrounding land. As the anthropologist Tim Ingold (2011: 14) describes it, 'Imagine a river ... it just flows without beginning or end, scouring the banks on either side and picking up speed in the middle'.

Psychodrama work, itself, is also contained in a number of ways. For example, the room in which it takes place is a container; the horseshoe shape of the chairs is a container; the stage becomes a boundary and the mode of production itself safely contains the powerful emotions that are generated. These all help to contain emotional 'leakage'. Of course, such containers also function to assist the warm-up, and to focus it. This explains why the image of the bubbling stream is so effective, because the image illustrates the same process taking place on stage: the psychodrama boundaries containing and focusing energy in just the same way as banks do with the energy of the stream.

Such boundaries are, again, containers for anxiety. They create a secure setting without distraction, secure enough that they can be readily taken for granted. This security, just like the security of a warm auxiliary ego, supports the warm-up and functional role development. The psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1990) referred to this in a speech he once gave, pointing out that no-one in the room ever considers the roof above them might collapse: this was the unconscious security in the room. For many Christchurch residents, such a remark is now tragically pregnant with meaning, since it has become just what they fear.

Winnicott, Holding and Containment

Winnicott is thinking of a building as a form of holding or containment (Gamble, 2007). It is a tangible idea, arising from the earliest physical interactions of holding and handling children: nestling, cuddling, stroking, embracing or manipulating their small frames. Boundaries are warm arms, laps, bodies. The security they provide comes from the moment-to-moment interplay of child and adult. Second by second, the interaction of touch, voice and look creates pleasurable experiences that, repeated over and over, become associated with what we learn to be safe, flexible boundaries. Boundary and relationship become fused through the mix of security and exploration. These interactions also promote multiple warm-ups to roles and relationships as the child sits or squirms. Here, psychodrama and psychotherapy are very close in how they understand the developing child.

Holding is a richly suggestive idea. It symbolizes this world that gradually becomes internalised: the secure home environment of earliest childhood. Home, as TS Eliot wrote, 'is where one starts from'. When it functions best, it is largely invisible (Winnicott, 1960). Mitchell and Black (1995: 126) write of Winnicott's ideas, that the mother 'protects the child without his knowing he is protected', and that unconscious protection sets the stage 'for the next spontaneously arising experience.'

Mitchell and Black's description is almost identical to Max's with the warm-up, but offered through a psychotherapeutic lens. The mother functions as the child's auxiliary ego, supporting an inner security that allows the child to create and explore: to flow, in just the way Moreno describes with an infant.

In contrast containment, a concept most linked to Wilfred Bion (1959), involves a mother containing a child's intolerable anxiety when it encounters unbearable experiences threatening its tiny, fragile boundaries. The parent's care and soothing attention absorbs and transmutes its overwhelming fears. In therapy, holding and containment are often used interchangeably, despite their different origins (Parry, 2010). Yet, both in their own way, address early anxiety and how it is managed.

Fragmentation

The alternative experience, for a child or a group, is fragmentation. Boundaries, once more, are key. I discovered this myself through a dismaying experience some years ago. I was running groups for international students at Otago University: young managers who were learning interpersonal skills through constant face-to-face interaction in small and large groups. I utilised psychodrama methods throughout their learning. Cohesion in one group, which included a number of American students, was especially strong because we had jointly endured the events of 9/11. This tragedy happened to fall on the day we met, but it fostered in us a genuine, empathic engagement well beyond normal

university teaching. The group also fought its way, over thirteen weeks, through other conflicts and reconciliations. So, in the last week, imbued with confidence, the students asked if we could hold our final group outside. It was a warm spring day and they wanted to celebrate what we had achieved. My mistake was to agree. Once outside, on the grass, by a calm river-bank, the group's focus simply melted away. The men were distracted by pretty girls, passing students stared at us, and our group became aware of friends close by. Our conversation became stilted, individuals became self-conscious, and the group's cohesion dissolved. It was a disappointing close to our work together. Without the boundaries of the familiar room to contain us, our warm-up leaked away, just as Max describes, diffused in a general, low-level distractedness.

Boundary and flow are central to Max's demonstration, but they are part of common human experience beyond the confines of a workshop. What we enact in a workshop we enact everywhere, and this is implicit in Max's teaching. Boundary and flow constantly intermingle with ordinary life. For example, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger writes of life as dwelling: as both a fixed enclosure and an ongoing activity, the act of dwelling on the earth. Even an ordinary room, he writes, is not just an enclosure but an opening, one that enables growth and movement, as we pass to and from it, much as Max describes (Heidegger, 1971). As Ingold (2011: 147) puts it, 'life in this sense is lived in the open, rather than being contained within the structures of a built environment'. Boundary and flow intermingle.

How does this assist the psychodramatist? In a number of ways. It enables us to think about sociometry, warm-up and role development whenever we are faced with different configurations of boundary and flow. This enables us to act as a better auxiliary with whomever we are engaged.

Interacting Online

A context in which this kind of interaction is increasingly common is virtual reality: the mingling of online worlds. When we are on Facebook, tweeting, texting, using social media or email, there are no physical boundaries. Isn't this like the students' riverbank? How do we develop or sustain a warm-up when the very foundations of time and space can be fragmented or invisible? Interactions can take place over time, episodically and sporadically, and can reach across vast distances; alternately, networks can fail unexpectedly, or contacts become unreachable. Few of these experiences are met in quite the same way face-to-face, yet they are intrinsic to boundary and flow.

I will illustrate this through a Skype session. Over two years, I had seen a client in the room at my Dunedin practice. We had developed a warm and reliable relationship and much useful work had taken place, even when she was working out of the country for extensive periods. Earlier this year, she moved to the North Island and I was confronted by a new experience: continuing our work by

Skype. This was a new experience for me, and one, initially, I found very difficult. The internet connection frequently collapsed, or her image pixillated and her voice became robotically distorted. She uses an iPad which she tilted up or down and I often found myself viewing just the top of her head or the ceiling in her room. Recently, the cat took to perching on her shoulder and that was all I saw. For her part, she was overwhelmed by how difficult she found the move from Dunedin, about the anxieties of new work, new friends, of managing her husband's illness and other family relationships.

I found myself distracted and unable to think. My warm-up fluctuated unexpectedly and I needed all my spontaneity to manage the disruptions of lost connections and pixillating images. My own roles as therapist threatened, at times, to fragment without the containing safety we had once shared in my room. We oscillated, at times, between the two warm-ups to which Max referred.

What sustained me, in the end, was learning to pay close, moment-by-moment attention to the fragments of interaction available to me. When there were picture difficulties, I would listen intently to what she said; when her voice distorted, I kept alive the felt sense in myself of what had just transpired between us. When the connection was lost, I attended to the disruptions between us once we reconnected. Over time, the more I sustained my own, continuous calm, the more the relationship, too, was sustained in this uneven environment. Jointly, we reached across time and space not just to sustain the relationship, but to build it in new ways that met the anxieties in her new world. This closely matches Max's comments that 'a functional role development contains the self in its role functioning'. In this virtual context, once I could sustain my own warm-up, I could assist, as an auxiliary, my client's role development in her new world to develop new roles and responses to it. Before this, there were moments when we were both in coping roles. What was crucial to me was to learn how to attend in new ways: I had to extend my own role repertoire by shifting fluidly between close listener, close observer, close self-observer and patient sustainer, both of herself and myself. In response, her spontaneity increased and a sense of purpose, focus, thoughtfulness and lightness emerged. Our separation became a new form of engagement.

Within this interaction there was both boundary and flow. The boundaries seem nearly invisible: but there were many: the reliable times we'd established for the calls; the agreed length of the sessions; even the boundaries of the screens on which we saw each other. There were also our separate spaces: our dwellings, North and South Island, with which we enclosed ourselves, away from others. Within these rooms we had our own reassuring objects and associations: familiar chairs, furnishings, objects; in her case, there was also her cat. Boundaries, in this context, are not only physical. Instead, they are repeated associations that build up a sense of trust and reliability. Through repetition, these sink into the background and form the facilitating environment (Winnicott, 1965) that sustains the interactions in the foreground.

When we learnt to tolerate network disruptions, I also began to see how we both placed a huge, largely unconscious reliance on the going-on-being (Winnicott, 1990) of the internet connection. It didn't hold us very well. Yet, between us we could develop new roles (active attender, active responder) in response. These new roles then assisted us to gather her role fragments together — the anxiety she may experience in other settings — so that a gradually expanding flow of spontaneity and confidence could emerge over time.

Central to these interactions was our moment-to-moment engagement, once I could fully grasp this. Let me now return to Max's demonstration and use this to illustrate more fully how boundary and flow intersect in his enactment.

Analysing the Demonstration

In the demonstration, tracing the moment-to-moment development, we can see how it reveals in action the very points Max is making. To do this, I will use the method of sentence analysis which Max himself developed (Clayton, 1993). We can also see the gathering flow of thoughts and feelings and how this draws together the group as it participates.

Max begins: 'Let's create containment.' Before this, there was just a dialogue between him and a psychotherapist. The rest of us were listening but not yet engaged. At this instruction, we begin to warm up to an enactment. The instruction also reflects what Max teaches at the end of the enactment: a group 'needs to be called to order in some way so that it can gather the force necessary to focus on being a group.' This is what he does at this moment. Our group begins to focus on what containment and flow involve. Max's next instruction enlarges his role as the inspired creator: 'Be a spring'. But it invokes only a very low level of warm-up in the protagonist: 'Oh God, I'll just be a little bubbling spring.' She stands still on the spot and raises her arms a little. Her counter-role is the bewildered complier; if we were to double her at this moment, we might add to her thinking 'What does he want from me? How am I supposed to be a spring?'

She finds out in the next moment when Max gets more strongly in relationship to her: 'Don't go like that on me.' Max spontaneously takes up the role of provoking engager. He, himself, is already a bubbling spring of spontaneity: another well-developed role of his own. As a group, we become more actively engaged in this interaction. Imaginatively, Max also expands his own role, becoming both a double and an instructor: 'You don't have to stand up. Springs don't have to stand up. They can go down.' He has swiftly role reversed with her, identifying the source of her hesitation, and providing her a way to expand her own role by getting on the floor. We can see the gradual gathering together of role fragments as her warmup deepens, her spontaneity extends and she responds. As a group we, too, are drawn together by a common curiosity towards what's developing in front of us. Where is this going? There is a joint warm-up to

curiosity and involvement taking place. At the same time as the protagonist becomes a flow on the floor, there is a growing cohesion amongst all of us, unifying our warm-up as a group of enlivened learners.

Now, the protagonist fully takes up the role: 'bubble, bubble, bubble.' At this point, she is squirming on the floor, to our delight and amusement. We become fully involved ourselves. Max heightens her warm-up: 'Be the living waters'. Her response moves her from role taking to role creation. She says in a loud voice: 'bubble, bubble, bubble, I am the living waters. I am flowing out to everybody.' The role has been fully created from initial role fragments. We, as a group, feel connected to her, not just as individuals, but as an involved collective. Her role, and the group, are both fully created at this moment, both focused on the learning that is emerging from Max's production.

Now, Max's teaching can take hold because our experience fully matches what he is about to say: the enactment creates a flow of energy, with a warm up to the progressive and functional aspects of a role. It has also extended the protagonist's experience because, doubled by Max, she has risked looking foolish by writhing on the floor. Her initial anxiety has been transformed into spontaneity and, as Max says, this development has moved from her inside, as invisible thoughts, to the outside, as action and expression. Now the containment of the role comes as her role fragments cohere in the creation of the bubbling spring. Likewise, her sense of self is contained by her absorption in the role she has created. In Max's words, it contains herself: the self in its role functioning. As a group we, too, are contained and integrated by our common absorption in the enactment. At this moment, we most fully become a group.

At this moment, boundary and flow, containment and flow work hand in hand. 'Containment' hasn't been something external to the psychodrama method, but something created through it. Moment by moment, it has been built out of the interactions and the emerging warm-up, establishing trust and exploration from each successful interchange.

If we relate this to other boundaries: the room, the horseshoe of chairs, the reliability in the repeated structure of psychodrama sessions, we can grasp something more. Secure boundaries are always associated with such moments of reliable human relationships. Our associations are built out of them: they are built out of moments of flow. When we see a horseshoe of chairs, if we have had earlier, good experiences, these become the background, or setting, for potential future good experience. In Winnicott's language, they become part of the holding environment. The horseshoe symbolises this: it can be forgotten while we get on with the drama in front of us.

Barbara Dockar-Drysdale (1990), expressed this very clearly with children, describing how they move first from experiences (flow), to realization where they make sense of the experience (Max's teaching in this case), to the final stage of symbolization (containment, symbolized as the bubbling spring, or a horseshoe of chairs).

Fully symbolised, emotional associations remain as a silent backdrop to awareness whilst we attend to the present. Neurolinguistic programming (NLP) describes this as a form of anchoring: linking a feeling to something that stabilizes a particular internal state that we can recall later (Dilts n.d.). Without this, experiences leak away, as Max first described. In this way, flow, boundary and containment become constantly intermingled, sometimes background, sometimes foreground.

CONCLUSION

Max's teaching arose from a disagreement between different perspectives in psychodrama and psychotherapy. Yet, what emerges from this encounter highlights the room for a generous exchange between perspectives. Neither side needs hold onto its suspicion of the other: each can move from their containment, their respective cultural conserves, to an experience of flow, perhaps risky, in the exchange of ideas between them.

Also, Max demonstrates a principle in the safety of a psychodrama workshop. As I've illustrated, it can be applied in very different contexts, whether it's face-to-face or across space and time afforded by digital technologies. In each case, boundary and flow work hand in hand to create, sustain and enlarge progressive functioning. In each, the building of relationship underpins the creation of safety and spontaneity. It is what Max himself enacts, and models, in the process of teaching these very principles. It is one of the many gifts he has left us.

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John Farnsworth has been involved with psychodrama for nearly 20 years. He is a member of the New Zealand Association of Psychotherapists and works in private practice at 555 George Street, Dunedin. John can be contacted at johnf@earthlight.co.nz