

Psychodrama: Descendant of the Shamans

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Psychodrama can be seen as a bridge between shamanism and psychotherapy ... Moreno's life and work embodied a confluence of magic, science and religion. (Landy, 1986, p. 70)



Photo of Grandmother Tree courtesy of the author's friend, Sequoia Krop

I have come to view shamanism as a predecessor of psychodrama: an ancestor. Perhaps shamanism lives in psychodrama, and psychodrama in shamanism. Perhaps they are siblings. Psychodrama and shamanism live inside me, intertwined and side by side, intimately connected. This is my world, my world view. This article is an exploration of the links between psychodrama and shamanism. As a beginning, I invite you to journey with me on a vision quest. This will serve as a grounding for later discussions.

The Vision Quest

I walk up the mountain. I feel like Saucepan Man from my favourite childhood book, Enid Blyton's *The Magic Faraway Tree*. I am delighted to be clattering in the way of the saucepans but loaded and awkward nevertheless. I remember my childhood times of climbing a tree and reading for hours, perched amongst her branches, becoming all the characters in those pages. I have my tent, my bedding, my clothes, 10 litres of water - all on my back or hanging from hooks and belts on my body. I walk to Grandmother Tree. Ancient mother of this land. Protectress.

I am Grandmother Tree. My back is bent from the many, many years of standing on this mountain, bending with the wind. My trunk is charred where fires have licked at my bark, and never quite demolished me. My leaves and great candle like cones are the signs of my proud fertility. My roots reach far into this dry brown red earth. I feel my sisters and brothers through this earth-far far away. I sense the ancient oaks, Gog and Magog on the other side of the earth, and nearer, my children and grandchildren, growing vigorously around me. I am old, so old. It is rare to see a human. A thing barely noticed. Today, I feel generous to this creature trudging past me, up the mountain. She stops beside me and turns. I feel her probing, her questing, her respect, her love. She bows toward me, and turns to continue on her way.

I am myself. Grandmother Tree speaks to me: "Go well. I am with you". I have a deep sense of trust that settles in my womb, a globe of warmth and 'rightness'. I send a ray of warmth and trust toward Grandmother Tree, as I bow toward her with gratitude and respect.

I climb. The rocks around me are ancient serpentine, green and brown and white, protruding from the earth, large and small, rough and jagged, barely worn; just as they were when spewed up from a nearby ancient volcano aeons old. I stop. There is a clearing amongst the stones where I will camp.

I am Serpentine. I remember my birth; that fiery, molten time at the centre of this earth. My kin were sent in all directions. We are connected. I have been here since my birth, changing from molten into hardened stone. I have been brushed by creatures: kangaroos, snakes and lizards. Very occasionally, and only as if dreaming, have I seen the dark hand of a human in all those centuries. And now there is one, light of skin, standing right here, dropping large objects. She exudes a sense of purpose. And then her hand is on me gently caressing. How strange.

I am myself. The Serpentine stone feels hard against my hand. Rough, sharp. I remember standing on Bridhe's beach on Iona mere months ago, and marvelling at the rounded green serpentine pebbles that cover the beach. And now I am here, touching their kin. I have with me a sacred stone that found me on Iona; a Serpentine, my Womb Stone. This sacred stone is memory of the centre of my being, my essence, my soul. I place the sacred stone, my Womb Stone, on this Serpentine. I have a sense of them fitting together, linking, like an ancient jigsaw puzzle. Mutual trust is here in this relationship. This mountain will be my questing place for three days and three nights.

I have created a sacred circle. I take off my clothes and lie down on the Earth. Base Camp is a long walk away. Down the mountain. There are no paths formed by human feet. My power animals, Bat and Falcon, are here. And my spirit guides, Bidy and Mary. They are my companions on this journey. We have constant conversations, often loving, and sometimes argumentative, but always fully present to each other.

Dusk is falling. The air is cooling. Clothed again, I hear other Questers in the distance, drumming to the rhythm of the failing light. I smell smoke. I look across the tree tops to the next ridge and see a line of fire approaching. Redder and redder as the sky gets darker and darker. There are flares of fire as she creeps closer and closer and devours the dry shrubs in her way.

I am Fire. I am red and orange and yellow and searingly hot. I want to spread and consume. I lick gently at this shrubby bush and I am deeply satisfied when it bursts into flames. I belong here. This is my time. It matters not to me who is in my way. My path is my own.

I am afraid. I imagine walking back down the mountain in the dark, crashing through the bush, the smell of smoke choking me as I run from the fire. And what about the safety of my fellow Questers? I dig through my gear to find the walkie talkie. The walkie talkie mocks me as I make the decision to call. I detest being vulnerable and afraid. I hear my spirit guide tut-tutting.

"Get on with it," she says. "Haven't you learnt yet. You are strongest when you are vulnerable."

Base Camp does not know of the fire. They respond.

The Base Camp response is illuminated several weeks later, on the psychodramatic stage, when I am directing an enactment. Two women from Base Camp, including the protagonist, climb the mountain to observe the fire. They see a strange golden globe of light between the trees. They reverse

roles with the light. Through continued role reversals, a relationship is developed. The golden globe of light is mysterious in origin. It says, "all will be well." The women warm-up to being practical and knowledgeable, attributes they now recognise they have in abundance. They see that the nature of the fire is that of controlled back burning in low shrubbery. They thank the golden globe of light and return to Base Camp, where they once more contact me on my walkie talkie.

Back in my Vision Quest, and after I have received the call from Base Camp, I am able to talk to the fire. My fear has settled. I let the fire know that I have accepted her purpose and I am no longer afraid. Sleep comes easily that night.

The third night of Vision Quest is traditionally the night of *Crying for a Vision*. After fasting for three days and three nights, we, the Questers and the Base Campers, all in our separate places, drum for hours intending to remain awake all night; crying and calling and waiting for a Vision. I am in the place between sleeping and waking. I Vision:

As I watch the black sky and the dots of sparkle, a star streaks across from right to left. I feel excited. Is it real? Is it Vision? What is the difference? Some minutes pass. A star streaks across the sky from right to left. In that moment, the earth and the trees, the cosmos and the stars and all the life that is contained there, become one giant living globe, of which I am one small interconnected part. Am I different from the star? How are we connected? Some minutes pass. A star streaks across the sky from left to right. I am the star. There is no difference.

The Vision Quest is a shamanic journey and a psychodramatic journey

The construct of the stage does not exist in shamanism. The stage is *Where I Am*. And my shamanic relationships are often not expressed in action. Yet the doubling I receive from my power animals and spirit guides is just as enabling as that which I receive on the psychodramatic stage. The role reversals I perform with the trees and the rocks enable me to know the world through their senses, and for them to know the world through mine. My role development as a healer and a teacher has been supported.

I was excited to find J. L. Moreno (1946, 1978) talk of precedents for psychodrama. "In primitive dramatic rites the aboriginal performer was not an actor, but a priest. He was like a psychiatrist engaged in saving the tribe, persuading the sun to shine or the rain to fall. In order to draw from the gods or from natural forces an appropriate response, methods of

pretending, persuasion and provocation akin to primitive psychodrama may have been widely used." (1978, p. 13).

He tells the story of a man of the Pomo Indians (Californian coast) who had been frightened into illness by an encounter with a wild turkey. The story as told by Moreno, tells that the medicine man became the wild turkey and this created a new response in the sick man.

The shaman and shamanism

Medicine man, medicine woman, priest, priestess, shaman, shamanka; are all titles that have been used interchangeably in many different cultures, in many different lands, over many thousands of years. I have learnt a great deal about shamanism from Jane Hardwicke-Collings (2014), founder of the School of Shamanic Midwifery. The shaman has many roles in a community. She (or he) is often the healer, perhaps using herbs or other medicines from the natural world. The shaman may have the gift of vision or 'the sight', attending to the gate between the worlds and often acting as a gatekeeper. She is the creator and leader of rituals and ceremonies. The shaman midwives lead transitions for individuals and groups in the communities they serve. They midwife birth and new beginnings, they midwife death and endings, they midwife significant change.

There are a range of principles that underpin the modern practice of shamanism. Some of these principles include: that there is an essential energy that permeates and connects everything; that there are realms that are seen and realms that are unseen and these realms are but aspects of the one reality; the keys to an onward journey and soul-based choice are the use of the will and volition (Hardwicke-Collings, 2014).

The connections to psychodrama in these basic concepts beckoned me. I wanted to make sense of these connections. There are five areas that have become significant: psychodrama as revelation, surplus reality, the drama of the soul, the theatre of truth, spontaneity and creativity. Let's look at each area.

Psychodrama as revelation

In *The Passionate Technique*, Antony Williams (1989) distinguishes between psychodrama as therapy and psychodrama as revelation.

In psychodrama as revelation ... the drama is a personal epiphany, a revelation of personal history and potential, an education and support for the passion to know the meaning of one's experience, and the drive to find, show forth and enhance the inner spirit. Psychodrama as therapy is neither 'higher' nor 'lower' than psychodrama as revelation: it merely has a different purpose; the solving of problems (p. 225).

My Vision Quest, and other shamanic journeys I have taken, can be considered psychodrama as revelation. I am also aware of the many times when directing a psychodrama, I have encouraged the protagonist to introduce their power animal, or spirit guide to the stage. Through the use of psychodrama techniques, role reversal in particular, the protagonist has been able to warm up to the 'problem solving', which is actually development of a new role, often a new way of being. Shamanic entities can also be used in psychodrama as therapy. Perhaps the double in psychodrama was centuries ago the shaman or the power animal.

Surplus reality and the matrix of life

In psychodrama as revelation, the *full subjective one-sidedness* of the protagonist is totally supported and explored (Williams, 1989). Full subjective one-sidedness requires the use of techniques to explore both the seen and the unseen realms.

With delight, I read Zerka Moreno and her colleagues: "On the psychodrama stage ... everything has soul and spirit. ... On the magical psychodrama stage we do not separate realities. Psyche and materia are the same thing – everything comes alive." (Moreno, Blomkvist, & Rutzel, 2000, p. 74).

When in the shamanic matrix of life, the earth is alive, the cosmos alive, all beings and creatures and matter have a life within them that we can access and communicate with. There are seen and unseen worlds. The sense of oneness and living connection can sometimes be seen as divinity. Some people may say real and unreal worlds.

Is it real when I am Falcon? It is certainly 'unseen' by all but me, through Falcon's eyes. Is it unreal when a protagonist on a psychodrama stage becomes a golden globe of light? How can it be unreal when we all see her become that light? Seen or unseen, real or unreal, or even divine; this sense of living connectedness, in the here and now, with all things, is central to both shamanism and psychodrama.

In psychodrama, this aspect of shamanism is elucidated by the term surplus reality. "Surplus reality can be defined as an intersection between different realities, known and unknown, where the ego's ability to control and distinguish ceases." (Blomkvist & Rutzel, 1994, in Moreno, Blomkvist, & Rutzel, 2000, p. 23).

Role reversal is a key psychodramatic technique of surplus reality and is experienced in vision quests and other shamanic journeys; I am Grandmother Tree, I am Bidy. A relationship is developed between roles when role reversals continue over time, no matter which realm the roles originate in.

“A shaman is one who flies between the worlds, and who has a foot in both worlds – that of the seen and unseen” (della-Madre, n.d.). This is also true for psychodramatists; director, protagonist and auxiliaries. J. L. Moreno (1947, 1983) explains how having a foot in both worlds, life and fantasy, brings forth the birth of true existence:

Life and fantasy become of the same identity and of the same time. They do not want to overcome reality, they bring it forth. They re-experience it, they are master: not only as fictitious beings, but also of their true existence. How could they otherwise give birth to it once more? (1983, pp. 90-91).

Is it possible that this ‘true existence’ is that essence of me, and of all, which is soul?

The drama of the soul: Soul transformation and healing

Shamans are the healers of their communities. They believe that any illness, of any kind, is a reflection of loss of the soul, or a part of the soul. Psychodrama has often been called the drama of the soul. I think of the soul in a similar way to Sue Monk Kidd (Kidd & Taylor, 2009): “Soul – an immortal essence like the spirit, the rich, inner life of the psyche, the deepest impulse of which is to create wholeness.” My deepest impulse to create wholeness, my soul, continues to lead me to the psychodrama stage *and* to shamanism – sometimes embodied in an auxiliary on the stage, sometimes embodied in my power animals and spirit guides.

When, as a psychodrama director, I instruct the protagonist to walk and soliloquise, to concretize or make bigger some small unconscious movement or body posture, or to become some oppressive force that is responded to from a role deep within the protagonist’s psyche, often with strength they did not know they had; these are times when we see the presence of soul on the psychodrama stage. Soul is present when an auxiliary takes up the role of a camp toilet, Grandmother Tree, or the golden globe of light. My soul is present in my relationship with my Womb Stone. This is the soul creating wholeness.

Zerka Moreno (Moreno, Blomkvist, & Rutzel, 2000) is “a profound believer in the transformation of souls. Our body is something that we just shed. It is really not that important. It is lent to us and we are responsible for taking care of it. Far more important is what you do with your soul.” (p. 53). It is a learning in vision quests, in shamanic journeys and on the psychodrama stage, to trust the soul, my soul, and the souls of others, to take the lead.

Jane Hardwicke-Collings (2014) says that, “the shamanic midwife as healer holds the space for the healing to happen rather than to make it happen.” This is also what a psychodrama director does when he or she

follows the protagonist's warm-up during the drama. Psychodrama techniques are used to create and hold the space for the healing, for the development of progressive roles. Shamans have a relationship orientation and within the relationship, the shaman encourages their clients to be active participants in their own healing, to take control (Tedlock, 2005).

In psychodrama, the warm-up is to the role relationships and the director works to enable autonomy in the protagonist through the skilful use of psychodrama techniques and the powerful holding of space. This provides adequate safety for the development of spontaneity and creativity, the retrieval of the soul; that deepest impulse to create wholeness. The psychodramatist as shaman.

Spontaneity and creativity

I have long loved the dynamic movement in Moreno's (1934, 1978) Canon of Creativity. Moreno describes the universe as "infinite creativity" (1978, p. 39) and spontaneity as an unconservable energy. He talks of a total operation of spontaneity – creativity – warming-up: the act/actor/conservé.¹ Spontaneity is the revitaliser of the conserve. Shamanic journeys and psychodramas are enactments of spontaneity and creativity, the movement of warm-up to create new roles, and a new way of being.

My relationship with Grandmother Tree and my ability to reverse roles with her have given me a new strength of relationship with the land upon which she stands. This has been enlivening for me, as I feel the birth of a sense of belonging that I have not had before. My spirit guides and power animals constantly challenge me and give me new perspectives. This enables me to act spontaneously with new responses to old situations. I have a sense of revitalisation and an enhanced capacity to create.

My deepest impulse to wholeness is the warm-up. My soul is the energy that keeps me moving. Spontaneity is found on a shamanic journey in the moment I see my Womb Stone lying on the beach amongst thousands of other stones. I pick her up and begin to speak to her. Creativity is the bond between us, the relationship of our knowings. The conserve for now is the woman I am at the deepest place in my being as I walk through this world, and the way this woman then works as a psychodramatist and shamanic midwife.

"In the shamanic traditions, health is more than the absence of physical suffering. It is an exuberance and a feeling of vitality and passion for Life." (McGarry, 2005, p. 8). This could also be a description of spontaneity. The Canon of Creativity is a snapshot of vitality and passion for life.

¹ See Canon of Creativity diagram on p. 46 in Moreno (1978).

The theatre of truth, thoughtful analysis and action

To 'shamanically' heal, one must take on the attitude of a warrior, a warrior for Truth, who faces challenge, willing to do what is right, rather than what is comfortable. (McGarry, 2005, p. 8)

As well as the drama of the soul, psychodrama is also known as the 'theatre of truth'. In shamanism and in psychodrama, the choice is mine to take up the truth, and to act upon it.

Max Clayton (1993), in his book *Living Pictures of the Self*, encourages us to take the integrative step after the vision:

Visions of creative living have been expressed in the lives of many individuals, although many visions float around in the consciousness of individuals due to their being caught up with wishful dreaming. An important factor in bringing this vision down to earth is thoughtful analysis. (p. 1)

When he talks of bringing this vision down to earth, Max Clayton is speaking of the psychodrama stage. He could also be speaking of shamanic healing journeys. I would add to his 'thoughtful analysis' the importance of taking action.

What actions do I take in my life after a vision quest, after a shamanic journey, or after a psychodrama? If I do not give thoughtful analysis, if I do not take action, to act upon the truth, does the healing occur?

Reflection

This article has been a process of dreaming and visions. A process of extended thoughtful analysis and accumulating these thoughts; comparing and contrasting with the thoughts of others, both spoken and written. The actions of constructing and writing the article, seeking feedback, re-writing and re-writing, is the theatre of truth. It is profoundly healing for me to express my truth in relationship with the psychodrama community.

Right now, in my practice, I see psychodrama and shamanism complementing each other – as siblings. They are both alive in the here and now. There is an appreciation and valuing of the sacred in shamanism that is also alive in psychodrama. Moreno's (1947, 1983) vision of an enchanted realm continues to beckon me.

there is ... a first universe which contains all beings and in which all events are sacred. I liked that enchanting realm and did not plan to leave it, ever. (1983, p. 3)

Grandmother Tree

*I am you
I am walking with soft feet
Breathing the air with a soft body in constant small movement.
I touch with fragile hands
I see with seeking eyes.
I am you,
My skin is thin.
I marvel at my transience.
I see Ancient land, Mother Ocean, a challenge.
I am you,
I feel displaced.
I yearn for other things, other places other people. Other.
There is always somewhere else, something else,
I am you.
I know Difference.
I feel love..... and fear,
I feel anger..... and joy.
I am you,
What is this thing of holding on?
There is only impermanence.
I am you.
I look to Grandmother Tree
I feel good to come home.
To myself.*



*I am Grandmother Tree.
Come be with me.
I know you. In every brown and green and uncurling leaf, I know you.
In every branch and twig reaching out to the cosmos, in the flow and beat of my sap and the
searching delving strength of my roots. I know you.
The soul of you. The whole.
Come- be with me- you will know me too.
Everything that has been and everything that will be is alive in you and me right now.
We have bowed our backs to the weary wind of time.
Our seeds burst forth with new life.
We have endured searing flames for the sake of the bursting.
There is a fresh wind, creating space for the new.
We have spontaneity you and I- an energy of magic quicksilver fuelling our responses to
happenings around us.
Be with me. Remember the Magic.
Wonder at the oldest of knowings.
We are Warriors of the Knowing- warriors of creativity and action.
Listen and watch now.
There is a fresh wind, creating space for the new.*

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