

Trusting Myself, Trusting The Method

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Martin is a therapist and group worker at SAFE, an Auckland-based community therapy program for boys and men who have sexually abused children. He presents his reflections of a weekend workshop for adult male sex offenders, focusing particularly on the warming up process to self, to directing, and to the group.

This piece of writing was written the day after one of my first 'solo-voyages' as a director of psychodrama. Looking back a year later with many more dramas produced and experiences integrated I enjoy my words and work. My purpose here is to explore some of my own internal process as I come to identify with the role of a psychodramatist at work.

Towards A Safer Future

It is Sunday afternoon and I have returned home from two days away with a group of four male clients and three therapist colleagues. We have conducted a Victim Empathy weekend for adult sex offenders in treatment. They are applying themselves to the task of understanding, and appreciating better, the experiences of their child victims, with a view to a safer future for all. We have used the psychodramatic method in this work. I am with my friend and training companion, John Wenger, and two therapists from the SAFE program who have acted as auxiliaries. These therapists are the regular facilitators of this group in the weekly program.

From Theatre to Therapy

We start after work on Friday evening. Drama and theatre-games provide the basis of a director-directed warm up. As our bodies move, emotions flow more freely and we become warmer and more fluid, allowing this method to better meet its purpose. For this group the aim is to widen perspectives, develop empathy, and move toward more accurate role reversal with victims. I use partner and group exercises with blindfolds for building trust in one other. I use theatre games based on improvisation and turn taking. I am clear that this is taking the men out of their comfort zones, so I approach this with much playfulness, ever watchful and responsive to the nuances I sense in them individually and as a group. These experiences warm up other qualities, such as curiosity, achievement, openness and trust. As these theatre improvisations involve imagination, physicality, spontaneity, play and touch, a warm up to exploring the unknown and unconscious begins. None of the men can remember doing anything similar since school

games.

Action-insight is the goal of this work, where the actions, feelings and thinking processes meet together to assist real change. I have assessed that the sociometry and communication within the group requires building and have focused on this in two preliminary two hour sessions as a visitor to their normal weekly groupwork program. This has perhaps not been completely successful as two members of the group have not turned up. Friday evening's play is valuable in creating the active and trusting learning environment we need. I believe this spontaneity training will develop fluidity in the capacity to connect with one's self and each other, and with our purpose. It will assist the warm up to new roles necessary for experiencing the world from the point of view of others, in this case the children the men have victimized.

Twelve Birthday Candles

Later that same night, we watch a poignant video where young people talk about living with the hurt of childhood sexual abuse. One speaks of remembering it at every birthday party she goes to. I ask the men to choose children's birthday cake candles to represent each child they have harmed. We stand outside in the dark with twelve candles placed in the earth, silently respecting, and watching them burn down. I leave it open to their own symbolism but say "*I wonder what memories the children you hurt will carry with them?*" In the distance moreporks (a New Zealand bird) hoot at the moon and the Tasman Sea laps and washes upon the nearby shore. We are surrounded by the night and I become very conscious of why we are here as a group and why I am doing this work.

I wake the next morning knowing that I am beginning to move toward directing the day's dramas. I tussle with a building anxiety, and imagine that I am setting out to sea and getting

out of view of the shore. I fear an impending creative death whereby I will end up not knowing what to do or where to go - a real sense that I am a fraud and about to be discovered. It is a debilitating and restrictive experience. I can, however, taste the force of my will pulling me forward to produce, to be the spontaneous actor and creator that I am. It is bittersweet on my tongue and something wise in me knows that I am ready for the inevitable spontaneity required, as once I was in the womb, preparing for that first great creative act.

Trusting the Method

I remember Dale Herron's words from supervision as I left the 'home shore' two days ago. "*Trust the method, Martin...Concretise what is*". Then there is the mantra whispered by Max Clayton to me in training. "*Produce. Produce. Produce*". A steadying warm up to personal authority and creativity begins to occur. I am breathing and my eyes are looking out now. I can hear the tui (another bird) in the trees outside and despite really wanting to drink coffee I decide against it this morning! As I bring this warm up forward in me I trust it will occur for the men too. What is to come is new. It has never been done before and we will make of this what we will. And for myself (and them) I add... "*and it will be great*". Now I am ready! My stride quickens as I walk towards the group room.

While I could write about the dramas, describe the roles and the rationale for decisions made, I am most interested in how my style emerges from my theatre background. This couples with the inspiration I felt while watching Max Clayton produce surplus reality scenes, not just from the protagonist's picture but also from his own creative vision of the drama. For me this weekend, it is in surplus reality that the psychodramatic method fires into life and I with it...

In Dad's Garden

Producer: *"Create the childhood football field now...use the rope... choose someone to be Dad finally coming and watching you play from the stands...reverse roles...Dad, you're here at the rugby and Mike is playing for the trophy...what's it like?... ok now...all of you! You are in a game of rugby and Mike is going to score the winning try....you can hear the whistle...Go!"*

And later...

Producer: *"Yes, he's dead, I know. I want you to think now of a place where you and your Dad could have a talk together, somewhere that's meaningful for you both."*

Tears come as he says, *"Dad's Garden."*

"Ok! Use props and people to create the garden, Dad's pride-and-joy! Describe it to us... what time is it? Dusk. Right it's dusk, and you are talking with your Dad."

A tender scene plays where Mike tells Dad about the things he loved and hated about him.

Producer: *"Now choose someone to be your young niece and bring her here to the garden also. Tell Dad what you did to Shayla...tell him how frightened she was...how you knew that...let him know what was happening inside you, how you feel about it now. Reverse roles...Dad, you tell your son how you feel about it....reverse roles. Reverse roles with your niece"*

Producer: (to the protagonist as Shayla with a double)...*"What is it like for you that Mike did this thing? Did you want this to happen? Could you stop it? What sort of uncle did you want? Reverse roles back to yourself. Dad died and there was nothing you could do to stop it... What connections do you make between what you have experienced and what Shayla experienced? Can this information help you in any way in your future?"*

The scene has produced tears. Feelings of loss, remorse, shame and helplessness are experienced throughout the system and there

appears in this catharsis some insight that can provide hope and understanding, even resolve. This is necessary. It is not enough that Mike cries. It is not enough that he is remorseful or ashamed. What is required is an integration of the many facets of his experience as a man, so that in his experience of the roles in his drama and the insights gained in role reversal, he has a clearer mirror of himself and his potential for both creation and destruction. There is a thread of self running through his life experience and this self is not simply a series of isolated events.

The others in the group experience themselves in the protagonist's position and warm up to their understandings and experiences. This is Mike's drama but this is also a group-centered drama, with the common theme of getting in touch with the victim's experience. Aspects of it will be repeated throughout the weekend. Through the sharing this group method proves itself pragmatic, efficient and effective. The men are empathetic toward each other and I name this. I remind the group of our purpose and our work to build connections between the members by encouraging them to express growing understandings from the drama, and feelings about themselves and each other.

Director: *"There is no-one else to blame here is there? And no way out of this. It happened and it must never happen again to anyone else. What can you do now to ensure this stops here? Tell Mike....it looks like he is really creating something new here for himself and is more resolved to successfully complete his treatment at SAFE? Tell him what you saw in him and what you are seeing now. Let him know how his work is helping you."*

I feel great. However, it is not all smooth sailing! In the last drama of the weekend I tell a Rotarian public speaker that we will enact a scene where he will make a public speech about the effects of sexual abuse on children. I am thinking that this

will demonstrate understandings and test roles developed during the weekend. However, I don't tell him this. In retrospect it would have been good to let him in on my thinking as it seems he warms up to suspicion, failure and defensiveness. We could have warmed up more together to play, ease and openness had I taken a different route with him. He does not warm up to the role. What am I going to do? I am tired, and he seems to be the toughest of the lot.

The Sea Captain

Somehow I recover from that dismal first scene by admitting my failure. I ask him what scenes he is warmed up to. He begins to speak about Mike's drama and his own dead father, and tears come chokingly. He covers his eyes and heads for the door, head down, hand in the air in defeat, profusely apologizing to the group. I warm up to action quickly. Now I get going with him.

"Stop! Robert, you are a man of the sea...you are twice my age" (78 years old and a sea captain) "You know the currents of the ocean and the rules of the harbor...I do not. I cannot sail though I long to. I love the patterns the wind makes on the surface of the sea but I do not understand it. You could teach me all I need to know to be safe out there and to really enjoy the sea... it took you a long time to learn that? Well I've learnt some things too. I've taken years to train myself in this work, and what I know a bit about are feelings and expressing them so you can be safe and in time come to really enjoy them. What say you let me teach you how to let the tears come so the pain comes out safely and you can benefit from this experience you are having, without feeling you're shameful and weak, and that men shouldn't cry?"

To my surprise he shifts. There is a long pause and he smiles in a mischievous sort of way, like Puck, and says "OK, but when do I get to take you out to sea?" The group laughs as we all imagine me buried at sea or walking the plank (or is that just my picture!). He is easy to like and while

'the Joker' may be an overdeveloped role in him at times, it is a spontaneous and adequate expression in this moment.

I coach him to feel his feet on the ground, to keep breathing and to let his lungs keep working, and his body to shake. The full breath-work seminar would be useful for him but what we do is adequate. He does cry and stays in the room, without retreat or apology. He acts on all my coaching. The others support him. I am moved.

We set out a graveyard of old friends, now dying in his advancing years. We have a discussion about how feelings get buried when really they need airing. He slips into storytelling mode and in soliloquy from the stage speaks to us as a group about his ill wife and the sexual difficulties he has experienced. Here is the private speaker and public speaker in action together. We hear about the sexual feelings and activity he resisted and repressed as a young naval officer in ports throughout the world.

Then he candidly tells the group how he felt some freedom in sexually touching the two little girls he abused, while knowing desperately that it was wrong. He has not before disclosed as coherently as this. It is difficult for him to role reverse with them and despite my encouragement to try, he steers a wide berth. "I can't go there. No. No."

Is this success or failure at victim empathy? He is more 'with' himself. He is making connections and integrating a number of life experiences. New roles are emerging that could assist him to one day role reverse with his granddaughters. I ask myself, was this a necessary step in his warm up to the next bit, and all he was able to do for now? What other steps are needed for him to truly role reverse? Perhaps we could enact and explore the scenes he presented in his storytelling? Perhaps more doubling and

storytelling might assist the social atom repair that is necessary to role reverse with others.

For now though, it is enough that he has witnessed and experienced all that he did. A good relapse prevention plan and strong support people will assist his safety. The embryonic roles that he has developed will need a structure to support them, as well as others who can model adequacy and ensure that he continues his work towards 'victim-empathy' and other modules of the program.

Danny the Champion of the World

I am beginning to understand that my psychodramatic work cannot be about orienting towards a product or a desired outcome, but rather about trusting and learning and practicing the method; concretizing what is present and building warm up and readiness for the next step. This is how I can be an auxiliary to spontaneity, my own and others', and approach living as Moreno advocated.

It is exhilarating work. Normally I work with children and adolescents, and here I am in the company of men the age of my father and grandfather, knowing that I am producing something life giving. As I sit in the group towards the end of a heartfelt sharing session, I feel power surging through my veins. It bloats me like a soaked raisin. I am somewhat overwhelmed and feel suspicious and slightly scared of this experience. Is this the megalomania spoken of about Moreno? Whatever this juice running through me is, it is also healing and all-loving. I resolve to talk about this in supervision and for the time being, thank god, let it be. I begin to notice it in others, in the room, all around me. I am breathing with the world and feel ready for whatever is next, and ready for that cup of coffee, and yes, a rest.

My experience now as I reflect and write about

this weekend is one of pride and compassion. Like a king-tide coming in full, disowned parts of me swell with acceptance, integration and movement. A deeper sense of intimacy creeps into my relationship with the psychodramatist within. It started once in awe from afar, moved through a mutual flirtation to full blown lust, and now I hunger for time together and walking down Ponsonby Road arm in arm, confidently committed!

I feel like Danny from Roald Dahl's "*Danny the Champion of the World*" - discoverer of the perfect bait for catching pheasants. I am like his discovery, the raisins swollen with brandy. Not just creation but the creator as well.

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Postscript

A year has passed since I wrote this paper, and my colleagues at SAFE and I are rethinking our work. We are grappling with questions about how we use the method to develop victim empathy, and the nature of the relationship between empathy and role reversal. We suspect that some of our practice has become a bit too formulaic, and as such the warm up to learning and creativity has become limited. We have begun exploring new ways to ensure that our work remains alive and life giving, and better meets our clients 'where they are'. This is a work in progress that represents our developing trust in each other and in the psychodramatic method, and also developments in the clinical practice of sexual offender treatment. My next leap of trust involves further inquiry into the steps necessary in the warm up to role reversal, and into the process whereby psychodramatic theory and practice can be utilised in this client group to build an orientation to life that is based on safe connection with others *and* with self.

