

# Awakening Creativity With Brief Enactment

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In my work I have found that all aspects of the psychodrama method can be employed to bring about a short dramatic enactment, often referred to as a vignette. Creativity can be awakened, systems can be explored, and role development can occur. The vignette opens up the possibility of spontaneous, artistic exploration and enables personal change. I have come to value its contribution to my work with individual psychotherapy clients.

## **The Vignette Defined**

In defining the vignette, I differentiate from a classical psychodrama session that includes group warm up, enactment and sharing in a process involving an hour or more. Such sessions rest on the assumption that participants have some knowledge of psychodrama and are willing participants. The vignette, whilst structured with warm up, enactment and sharing, may vary from a few moments of concretisation to an enactment of one or two scenes of up to thirty minutes. It is thus applicable in diverse contexts with groups and individuals where there is little previous knowledge of psychodrama.

## ***The Vignette Applied in Psychotherapy***

### **Recovering Spontaneity**

I meet many people in my psychotherapy practice who have experienced a traumatic event that has dramatically changed their lives. They have struggled to cope with everyday life. They often express a desire to confront the effects of trauma and reconnect with their spontaneity. I actively listen as the protagonist expresses for the first time to another human being what they may consider unspeakable and unnameable. Often a person will begin, "You will probably think I'm crazy, stupid, weird, horrible." At these times I silently recall moments when I have felt vulnerable in speaking for the first time of difficulties in my own life. I remember how I have worried that the other might think less of me, and found to my surprise that this was not the case. It is in these moments of honest, vulnerable expression that the universal human experience is most deeply felt and new life is seeded.

Writing about the principles of spontaneity,

Moreno (1946:91) differentiates between a dramatic person who is not necessarily spontaneous, and a spontaneous, ordinary person who is willing to create something new in her/his life.

*"The extreme opposite of a person who is a genius at dramatising the self but totally unproductive, is the person who is totally productive and creative although perhaps undramatic and insignificant as an individual. If we would empty their mind we would find it in a permanent 'status nascendi', full of creative seeds always in the temper of breaking up existing conserves and germinating new forms, new ideas, and new inventions".*

### **Healing Past Trauma**

There is a wide literature addressing various aspects of traumatic stress disorder. For example, Hudgins (1998:2) maintains that, in the experiencing of catastrophe the ego may become overwhelmed and spontaneity no longer accessible to the victim. Dalenberg (1999) describes three distinct biological messages of complex post traumatic stress - "*remember this moment*" where the person is flooded with traumatic thoughts, images, and nightmares in day to day life, "*never go this way again*" where there is an instinctive avoidance of people and situations, and "*be prepared*" where the body maintains vigilance and hyper arousal.

A number of theorists discuss the place of the vignette in treating post traumatic stress disorder. Hudgins (2000:237) recommends concretising positive restorative roles to develop safe containment. Schutzenberger (2000:294) uses psychodrama vignettes of three to ten minutes duration to assist clients to relive historic family events and dramatic death, express grief and loss and bring closure to past trauma. Van Der Kolk (1996:195) emphasises that knowledge of trauma may leave a person without words to express the enormity of their

experience. There is disruption of narrative. He describes the value of using drawing and brief psychodramatic interventions in trauma recovery to help develop a language for effective communication, and for the symbolic transformation that can occur in psychotherapy. Raimundo (2002:49) cites current neurological research in highlighting the efficacy of psychodrama in engaging the triune brain, that primitive reptilian structure which registers instinctual response, the limbic brain that imprints images and symbols, and the cortex where rational thinking and linear narrative are activated. He emphasises the integration of thinking, feeling and behaviour that can result from brief enactment. Both Van Der Kolk and Raimundo affirm the psychodramatic vignette because it facilitates a 'show and tell' that is effective in healing traumatic memory.

### **Safety and Expression**

The vignette lends itself very well to situations where there is a high degree of concern for safety and a limited tolerance of intense feeling. The shorter enactment allows for a manageable amount of expression. Furthermore, a vignette can reveal the essence of a role system or facilitate an expanded display of a wide range of somatic, social and psychodramatic roles. Progressive, fragmenting and coping roles can be examined in an atmosphere of ease and creativity.

### **Planning, Practise and the Future**

The vignette is an excellent vehicle for stimulating thought about the next steps a person might need to take. New roles can be practiced in the form of future projection or as part of a role training session. The focus on a selected area may often produce a reassuring feeling that '*things are manageable*'. In this sense, the vignette shares a common purpose with role training, where one aspect of the personality is focussed on at any one time.

## *Illustrating the Value of the Vignette: John's Journey*

### **Courageous Integration**

In the therapeutic relationship with John, I meet a man of determination and generosity who is ready to confront dark and vicious memories of childhood abuse, loss and grief. Through vignette enactment over time, John emerges with a new sense of integration and, in his words, with '*joie de vivre*'.

### **First Meeting: The Moment of Crisis**

John is a tall, well-built, friendly-faced and open man. He is more mystified than anxious about the circumstances of his counselling appointment. He says "*I feel very embarrassed. I was in a supermarket and wandered out and then I was searched and I had absentmindedly put a packet of biscuits in my bag. I've never done anything like that before. I lost it. I've been having panic attacks.*"

At this stage he has been arrested and advised to attend counselling. I invite John to tell me about his life during the past six months. John describes falling deeply in love and impulsively selling all his possessions. He has travelled with his lover to live in an unknown European country. John cannot speak the language or work. He feels isolated and the new relationship quickly founders. In desperation, John returns to New Zealand and faces life in his mid-forties without money, home or work. He stays with friends and feels dazed and depressed. When I ask John how he has sustained himself during this difficult time, he maintains that he is used to "*keeping on going*". He describes how he nursed his mother for two years before she died. He talks about friends who have died of AIDS, about the beauty of colour and landscape, about his appreciation of art and conversation. He speaks about graduating from university and describes the responsible management job he has previously held. When I ask him if he has ever

attended counselling before, he replies "*Briefly when I dealt with some abuse that happened when I was young, but that's all dealt with now*". John quickly goes on to describe times in his life when he has looked at the sea and wondered if he might drown himself. Then his humour bubbles forth and he says "*That only ever lasts for a moment and then I notice the colour and beauty of the water and I don't want to detract from that*".

During these sessions, I have built up a picture of a person who wants to live more than he wants to die. John's emerging role system includes progressive roles such as *generous open relator, dedicated companion, compassionate caregiver, responsible manager and appreciator of beauty*. There are coping roles as well, such as *impulsive risk taker, confused shopper and dismitter of past events*. In the fragmenting role cluster we meet the *destitute traveller, panicked shaker, despairing contemplator of suicide and absent griever*.

### **Safety and Resources**

Over time, John and I establish a relationship of respectful trust and safe, creative freedom. I offer a variety of warm ups to vignette enactment, including interactive drawing therapy (Withers, 2000). Using John's words, images and use of colour and artistic expression, scenes emerge which are then set out in action. John chooses to make use of artwork and collage in his time outside the therapy room, especially when he is deep in grief. He creates a collage of autumn leaves, each a memory of loss. John experiments with chairs to concretise roles in enactments at home. He keeps a journal.

### **Confronting Childhood Trauma**

John decides to live alone, finds a low cost flat and some part-time work. One day he says, "*You'll probably think I'm weird but I thought I would talk about my past today. I've had nightmares again*". I notice John's body shuddering involuntarily. He discloses adolescent years of

violent, sadistic abuse by a male neighbour. He narrates his experience as a teenager living with this secret, feeling isolated and terribly alone. The abuse ceases when the neighbour becomes terminally ill, and nobody else knows that it occurred.

During these years, John had lived in a chaotic home with four generations of women - his grandmother, mother, sister and niece - and an uncle. In his early years John believed his grandmother was his mother. He was told his father was dead. A man, a friend of the family, was an occasional visitor to the house. When John was twelve he was told this man was his father. From an early age he was responsible for the running of the home while his mother worked to maintain the family. Living in emotional isolation, John cooked, cleaned and gardened. When the abuse began he found it impossible to tell his family. The neighbour was violent on numerous occasions and John was frozen in terror. The neighbour held John psychologically captive by threatening to harm his own family. As his son was John's only neighbourhood playmate, this compounded John's terror. John travelled miles to a school that was chosen for its status rather than the provision of a supportive environment. This added to John's isolation because school friends lived too far away for regular play and friendship.

John has reported many physical symptoms, thoughts, feelings and behaviours that indicate early traumatic stress. He decides to work through these disabling memories and create a meaningful life for himself. He wants to be free of panic and bulimia, his body free of involuntary tremors and the frozen state of inertness that often overcome him, and his mind free of nightmares, daytime dissociated fantasies and thoughts of suicide.

### **Vignette One: Metaphors for the Unspeakable**

John presents a flow of images and metaphors for the unspeakable. We begin a session with drawing. When words fail images often speak for us. A picture emerges of an axe-wielding adult chasing a terrified child. John, refusing the neighbour's seductive approaches when he was fourteen, had witnessed the man chasing his son with an axe. Eventually John acquiesced, in terror of the consequences if he continued to resist. John goes on to describe a dream about a badly wounded cat fighting for its life. He draws the image of the dream and we then set it out in action. We put the drawing of the wounded cat on the psychodramatic stage. Through this action and the use of artistic expression, John is able to move into progressive roles. The *spontaneous actor* and the *compassionate observer* emerge. I double John, standing alongside him and reinforcing his clear desire to be free of the traumatic effects of these past events.

Director, "*What does this cat need?*"

John in the role of *compassionate observer*, "*Shelter, comfort, tenderness*".

As an *active nurturer*, John places cushions and soft toys to create a nurturing environment. He brings the cat to this safe place of hibernation where it will have plenty of time to heal. Then John is surprised by another image that spontaneously emerges in his mind. Trusting himself, he enters the new scene. A sun lion appears, a magnificent, strong and powerful being. John contemplates this image for a significant amount of time. The sun lion contains the seeds of progressive roles, the *powerful protector*, *proud energetic being*, and *wise guide*. John begins to express these roles through interaction with the wounded cat. The cat responds with cautious acceptance. Eventually, it relaxes in the knowledge that the *powerful protector* is alongside. Through John's creative expression and life force we have co-created

scenes of sheltered nurturing and tender protection to address early traumatic pain. In this vignette, therefore, we have created the beginnings of powerful life transformation.

### **Vignette Two: Joy of Childhood**

In a later session, John makes a tentative request to go to a nearby park. He expresses a wish to relive some of the joy of his childhood, maintaining that he has good as well as bad memories. It is autumn. Leaves are everywhere on the ground, brown, russet, red and gold. The sun is shining. John expresses the joy of being free in the fresh air and in the presence of trees. He and I stomp through the layers of leaves on the ground, remembering childhood delights and laughing with the sounds of the leaves. I am doubling John. He grieves deeply for lost relationships, lost friendships, lost meaningful work. He appreciates my companionship as we walk together. He realises that he does not have to live inconsolably alone in grief. John becomes aware of the timelessness of the surrounding trees. He feels comforted by them, and I direct him to reverse roles. He becomes the timeless spirit of the trees and expresses himself with renewed hope. However, John is also aware of something unsatisfied in himself. He says that he wants to eventually attain a level of indifference to the trauma of the past.

### **Vignette Three: Meeting the Cast.**

#### **Do they want to meet each other?**

Some weeks later in the therapy room John says *"There's something I want to talk about. I feel like several different people inside my head when I'm walking down the road. I'm not sure who I am. The best way I can describe it is, it's like living in an abandoned mansion in a war zone and these different parts of me are all living there together. There's a presence of pure evil, some authority figure that threatens all of us, and there is a young boy silently playing the piano. There is a little girl in a party dress and another boy, a rebel who likes to party. He likes a*

*good time. He is frenetic all the time. There is a small child alone with a dog and a strong, tall watcher called Patsy who can't be touched. They all live there and none of them talk to each other"*.

As a clinician I register Dissociated Identity Disorder. John watches a television documentary and reads books about this disorder. These experiences assist him to feel validated and make sense of his past and present world. In vignette form, we set out the devastated mansion and gardens. John looks around the room and chooses chairs and cushions, rocks and plants to concretise the elements and characters, each of whom has a solitary place somewhere in the scene. John briefly role reverses with each character. At this time it is enough for him to simply experience each role and the connection between them in the one scene.

### **Vignette Four: Emerging Voices**

In the next vignette, John gives voice to each cast member in the mansion with the exception of the silent piano player. He is lost in the music, cut off from everything and everybody. He is not ready to speak. He hears that it is safe for him to give voice to his experience, but he is cautious. John, in the role of knowledgeable compassionate liberator, announces to the group that the war is over and that they are all safe now. He brings in a green sports car to transport them to safety. They drive to a beach where emerald water laps peacefully at the edges of the sand. As we share at the conclusion of the vignette, John describes how he used to play the piano at home while the neighbour watched him from the garden. He says, *"I stopped playing the piano. I have not played since"*. Dalenberg's message resonates, *'never go this way again'*. I feel immense sadness.

### **Vignette Five: John's Inviolable Spirit**

Over the following weeks and months, John reverses roles more and more fully with each of

the young cast members in the mansion. They increasingly communicate with one other. However, the piano player, rendered silent by all the hate and pain of violation, maintains his stance. Then one day John sets out the roles of Allan, a *gentle inviolate observer*, David, the *rebellious reveller* and Patsy, a *strong humorous survivor*. These three characters join forces and approach John *the silent one*. The scene develops as David, Allan and Patsy move closer. They say *"We will look after you. We will teach you to speak"*. Silent John betrays a spark of interest and his body moves slightly towards them. The three protectors, for this is what they are, continue. *"We will give you karate lessons. You can join us when you're ready"*.

Director, *"Show him karate"*.

The protectors demonstrate karate punches and kicks. Their voices express a sound *"HAAAAA"*. And something new emerges as John warms up. Silent John utters a sound *"haa"* and moves a little closer. John feels something of a sacred spirit present within him. He knows that in this moment he is inviolable. Throughout the horrific events that he has experienced, some part of him has remained innocent, pure and sacred.

### **Vignette Six: I am John:**

#### **The Integration of a Role System**

Some weeks later, John describes his inner world. He has noticed that he is calmer inside. He says *"It's as if they're coming home. All the different parts want to talk all at once. I can hear the whispers of their voices, ghosts past"*. He sets out a scene of the young boys and girl coming home together. A wizard appears on the psychodramatic stage. It is Merlin in a chamber full of old books. John takes up the role of the wizard, saying to young John *"I have one last spell to cast"*. Merlin invites John to create joyfully, to create with light and colour. He says *"Use the magic carefully. Live with a generous spirit"*. John completes the session by saying *"I feel as if I can now say I am John. I feel more as one, as myself. There is only John. I am John"*.

### **The Results of Vignette Work:**

#### **A Strengthening Progressive Role System**

As we approach the completion of our therapeutic relationship, John has acquired a new job as a café/bar manager. He is proving himself a competent worker much valued by his employer. He is enjoying music again, as well as eating nourishing food. He no longer experiences involuntary tremors in his body. Although the nightmares still occur, John has noticed that he has more control over these. He has developed several strategies to help himself relax during the times that he becomes overwhelmed with stress and tiredness. He spends much time grieving, writing, rearranging his life and decorating his flat. He works long hours and frequently walks home alone in the moonlight, alive to the beauty of the world. He is beginning to spend more time with old and new friends, and has started making plans for the future.

#### **Implications for Counsellors and Psychotherapists**

In this article I hope that I have conveyed to practitioners the value of the vignette. The briefest concretisation of images and words may bring fresh understanding and the emergence of a new, enabling response. Lively conversation about role descriptions assists clients, as they consciously become authors of their life narrative. Brief enactments invite instinctual, emotional, and imaginative expression with or without the spoken word. Possibilities are gently explored within safe boundaries. The sharing in conversation upon completion of enactments encourages development of roles that can become a cohesive, enabling narrative for the client.

In my experience, other methods integrate well with psychodrama vignettes. Descriptive and diagrammatic role analysis, and the visual record of roles in artistic images adds value as a

meaningful summary of role development. These visual displays are important tools in teaching, counselling and supervision, and, as well, have proved highly effective in psychotherapy closure.

Most importantly, however, from my point of view, is the potential for the release of spontaneity when clients know that they have many safe and effective choices in therapy. Vignettes used for trauma recovery, where the purpose is recovery of spontaneity and creativity, promote safety and the development of roles that strengthen the protagonist.

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